Tokyo Ravens Volume 09

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東京エイリアンズ
to the Darksky
あざの耕平
Kouhei Azano
ファンタジア文庫

「信じない、夏目――！」
黒と白のラビリンス
to The DarkSky
9

そして、運命が変転する
新たな東京の夜が幕を開ける

私は、あなたが――
――春虎君

Chapter 1 - Death

"The true essence of sorcery is 'lies'?

Truly. That is just like you.

But I don't believe that.

'Lies' indeed become the flowers of magic, but flowers are supported by their roots.

Trust.

Without that, no 'lie' will shine."

--Hishamaru

Part 1

The child didn't have a name.

A taboo child. An evil spirit. She was held in contempt and isolated. She understood she was that kind of existence ever since she learned about the world, even if no one explained it to her.

She wasn't cared for, she wasn't loved, and she just 'existed' through each and every day. She believed without a doubt that it would continue until her death. She believed that that was her 'life'.

But she was wrong. It wasn't like that.

Because her life was full of ripples, neither superior nor inferior to anyone else born in that era.

Everything began with a lively, spirited voice. The voice of a young boy who flung people aside and broke into her prison, opening the heavy door.

"You're my shikigami? I see. You're very strange."

It was a light shooting into the deep darkness.

The moment she was illuminated by that light, the true meaning of her 'life' began.

... "......I'm sorry..... for always hiding..... the thing about Hokuto....."

A healing charm.

Harutora came to his senses. What the hell was he spacing out for? Why was he wasting time. The bleeding was serious. He had to stop the bleeding right now. Quickly. Now. Right now.

... "But. You probably..... already realized....."

He had healing charms on him. He had taken them and other charms along as precautions against his aura going out of control, the oni Natsume had encountered, and the Onmyouji monitoring the dorms. Right, he had the necessary and sufficient amount.

... "Harutora-kun....."

He fumbled with the charm box on his waist, flicking open the lid with his fingertips and drawing out charms - but he couldn't complete his usual motion. His fingertips trembled and didn't listen to him. His mind was immediately painted over with anger and irritation, and he even became unable to breathe.

... "I love you."

Stay calm. No. Hurry. Hurry. He ignored his fingertips that still couldn't successfully move, using his whole hand to force open the charm box. Clatter. He grabbed all of the charms collected inside without any reservations.

... "......I won't forgive you if you die....."

"Order!"

Strength that should have been almost dried-up flowed out from somewhere. He pressed the charms he had grabbed onto the wound as if to stop the bleeding.

The moment he used magic, the fog enveloping his mind dispersed. Natsume remained motionless on his left arm with her eyes closed. The uniform was soaked from chest to abdomen. Fresh, warm liquid dripped down from the weight leaning on his arm, but it quickly cooled and hardened upon contact with the outside air.

His heart felt as if a chunk of it had been ripped off as he gazed at Natsume's body. The chill of coagulating blood. He resisted the urge to vomit that rose in his throat, throwing aside distractions in order to focus on his magic.

He searched for and infused magical energy into the healing charms that he pressed onto her body. At the same time, he meticulously rewrote the magic of the charms to match Natsume's wound. Every second counted. The effects were optimized when many healing charms were put together. He pushed his spiritual pressure to its limits, pouring in magical energy with so much force that the magic almost burst.

However, it still wasn't enough.

Of course, this was his first time treating someone's severe injury with magic. But for some reason, the things he had to do emerged one after another in his mind. He added his body's aura to Natsume's stagnated aura, forcefully making it circulate. He made his magical energy, that had been increased through connected five-element charms, flow into the healing charms. Then charm magic. He used a simple shikigami to momentarily fill the missing body tissue. It was even at a surgical level, but right now he could even understand those procedures. Anyway, he did

everything that he could. He used all his means to bring Natsume back - he had to bring her back.

"...Haru...!"

He felt like he heard someone shouting above him. But he couldn't understand the meaning of those words, even though his mind was so clear.

"Harutora! You--"

The next moment, he heard someone's voice again and an impact came to his feet and knees with a bang. He immediately protected Natsume's body. He finally understood the situation after he collapsed on the hard asphalt road - they had fallen onto the ground and landed. Right, he had been flying in midair until just now - and out of control. No, right now he had to focus on healing Natsume.

He lay Natsume's body down on the concrete ground, continuously casting magic as if to cover her. He stopped the bleeding, closed up the wounds, and repaired the damaged organs. Not enough blood. Magic instantly emerged in his mind and his mouth chanted an incantation he had never heard of on its own. He had to restore her to before. No matter what. Without leaving a single wound. Absolutely.

Damn. He cursed unconsciously. Damn, damn, shit. Complaints overflowed from his mouth.

Why had things become like this, why had people done such things. Why.

Who was it.

Momentarily, he felt a terror and despair that he had never known, but Harutora instinctively denied everything. Anyway, he wouldn't admit such things, such things weren't allowed. It had to be undone as if nothing had ever happened.

It's alright, he desperately said to himself. The treatment was perfect, and Natsume's wounded body was clearly gradually recovering. She would be as good as new in a bit of time.

However--

A loud roar.

He searched for the next incantation from the endless knowledge that constantly streamed in. To make a stopped heart beat and make collapsed lungs expand. To make someone awaken. To make Natsume wake up again.

"......tora!"

How could he repeat the mistake he had made with Hokuto!? His current self was different from back then. His current self had only come to be after Hokuto had vanished and he overcame various experiences after setting his goal to be becoming an Onmyouji. He should be able to save her. Saving someone wasn't much. His important friend, his precious master, and his irreplaceable childhood friend.

He could definitely save her, so please, please, please.....

"Harutora!"

His shoulder was grabbed from behind.

His body flinched, and at the same time, something quickly reacted in the corner of his vision.

Something black, like the wing of a raven--

"Gah!?"

Touji, who had put his hand on Harutora's shoulder, was blown away.

It was none other than the black coat he wore that had knocked Touji away - intending to protect its 'master'. This cloak-like, coat-like outer garment that seemed to be woven from raven feathers. The 'Raven's Wing'. The lower hem fluttered menacingly as it transformed.

Touji instantly crossed his arms to guard against the Raven's Wing's preemptive attack. He was hit hard, but managed to land on the asphalt road. Fortunately, Touji had reacted reflexively, or else... Or if he hadn't luckily stayed in his oni form, he wouldn't have gotten off so easily.

Just like Natsume.

"......!?"

Harutora's face twisted, reflexively taking off the Raven's Wing and throwing it aside. Immediately, the spiritual power coming from the Raven's Wing cut off and an intense exhaustion swept through his body. Intense, pulsating heat ran through him. His overloaded nerves burned as if they had short-circuited.

Hah. Harutora slumped onto the asphalt road, the strength in his body wasting away.

He weakly turned his head towards Natsume, who lay beside him.

It wasn't Natsume who was there.

What was there was Natsume's corpse, wrapped in a bloodstained uniform.

After taking off the Raven's Wing, Tsuchimikado Harutora collapsed to the ground as if whatever possessed him had vanished. Only after confirming this did Ato Touji drop his guard.

Touji was also extremely confused, but he forcefully suppressed his wavering heart and began studying the area.

The place where Harutora had fallen was the middle of the road. Though they were quite far from the location of the fireworks festival, it seemed that traffic from the nearby areas had also been blocked off. But instead of cars coming by, there were several visitors passing by who had stopped nearby to see what had happened. "......Reboot." Touji quietly chanted the incantation, releasing his demonic transformation.

The fireworks festival's fireworks still continued blooming. The night sky was dotted with bursts of color. The light dissipated from the explosions slowly winked out around them.

Dairenji Suzuka was also there, in a location slightly farther than Touji. She and Touji - and also Natsume - had chased after the rampaging Harutora together after he had been possessed by the Raven's Wing. Though she had touched down to the ground, she hadn't gotten off her paper shikigami. Frozen in place, she looked at Harutora with a pale, naive expression - and at Natsume who lay in front of him.

Her mind was probably blank. Even though Touji thought this, he wasn't an exception. A nearly crazed destructive impulse stood right behind Touji, peering over at this side.

But Touji, who had continued facing his demon, had learned ways to deal with despair.

He gave up on thinking, wiped his emotions, and approached Harutora.

Harutora was slumped on the concrete with a soulless expression.

His rampage until just recently had almost depleted his spiritual power. Harutora had lacked spiritual stability since he had fought with Shaver in the Meguro branch. He had also lost control during the day today and had been suppressed by the 'one-armed oni'. He had instantly gone rampant because of the Raven's Wing.

But the current Harutora seemed to have recovered a bit from the boundary where his life was in danger, like he had been during Natsume's final moments. After Touji confirmed that fact, he decided to stop his analysis there and turned his gaze away from Harutora.

Then, Natsume.

He slowly approached her, feeling her pulse and checking whether she was breathing.

She could still feel aura from the girl's body. However, Touji had learned that this was what General Onmyoudou called 'lingering aura'. The aura lingering on Natsume's body wasn't too different from Natsume's familiar aura. But even so, it was no longer Natsume.

She had no pulse, nor was she breathing.

Natsume was already dead.

A faraway impulse started baring its fangs at Touji again. It would be so liberating to just entrust himself to that impulse. But Touji kept completely calm. Right now, he had a mission that he had to stay calm for.

"......Harutora."

Touji called out. Harutora didn't respond, but Touji understood that unlike before, these words reached his friend.

But he didn't know how to continue speaking after that. It was too heavy of a burden. Touji made every effort possible to eliminate his emotions. In this kind of time, it was meaningless to force himself to do things that he couldn't do. Touji clenched his teeth slightly, rising and turning to Suzuka.

"Suzuka."

"....."

"Suzuka!"

Suzuka shivered, turning to him.

"Help me put up a barrier to drive people away. Can you do that?"

"......Uh, yeah."

Suzuka nodded, her expression stiff. But something descended from above faster than Suzuka could put up a barrier.

"Yukikaze....."

The white horse shikigami that Natsume had ridden while chasing after Harutora, Yukikaze.

The ancient shikigami that had served the Tsuchimikado family for generations seemed to already understand the situation. After descending and standing some distance away from Natsume and Harutora, it remorsefully lowered its head. Touji left Harutora and approached Yukikaze, putting his hand on its neck with a pat.

Also, it wasn't only Yukikaze who appeared.

"Ah, they're here! Everyone!"

Even Touji, who was keeping calm, inadvertently stiffened because of that sudden voice.

Across from where Yukikaze stood. His classmates Momoe Tenma and Kurahashi Kyouko ran over from the direction of the road. When Harutora had lost control, Natsume had mounted Yukikaze, and Touji and Suzuka had ridden Suzuka's shikigami and immediately flew into the night sky. Tenma and Kyouko who were

left behind seemed to have run after their friends. The yukata-wearing Kyouko had taken off her wooden sandals and run in her tabi.

Seeing the two of them run up, Touji felt the impulse to escape, but he dismissed that desire, walking up as if to greet the two of them.

Tenma and Kyouko were short of breath. They had to have run quite a distance.

Even so, they desperately approached Touji's side.

"H-How's Harutora-kun? Did you find him?"

Touji only nodded at Tenma's question after hesitating for some time. After some confusion, Tenma's gaze was drawn to Harutora sitting on the road. Instantly, the eyes behind his glasses shone, but when he noticed the 'other person', he was stunned.

Kyouko, who arrived a step later, bent down in discomfort, putting her hands on her knees. Then, she raised her head to look up at Touji, looked at Tenma, and then turned her gaze in the direction he faced.

"......Eh?"

A dumbfounded sound leaked out from a gap in her chaotic breathing.

She asked with an almost stupefied expression:

"......Natsume-chan?"

The smile that had reflexively emerged on her face slipped off. Then, she suddenly paled.

"What are you doing?"

Tenma asked. Then, as if his own words had brought him to his senses, he grabbed Touji's sleeve.

"What are you doing!? Hurry up and call an ambulance!"

His voice and knees shook. "Hurry!" Touji didn't move in response to Tenma's pleading words, his face pained. Tenma slowly comprehended the meaning of that and went speechless.

On the other hand, "......Natsume-chan?" Kyouko repeated her question in an almost inaudible voice.

"No way. ......You're kidding, right? Enough is enough. That's not possible..... Why did this happen..... Why....."

Hysteria slowly entered Kyouko's voice.

The visitors watching from afar also began making a racket. Touji's heart was invaded by a hard-to-control restlessness again. He wanted to bellow loudly, he wanted to go on a rampage. But doing that wouldn't help anything. Calm down. Touji desperately clenched his fists.

"......Tenma. What about 'that girl'?"

Tenma seemed to instantly realize who he was referring to.

"......She's probably still in the same place..... We just tried to catch up to you guys."

It seemed like Tenma was calmer than Kyouko, or he still hadn't gotten a grip on the reality in front of him. "I see." Touji nodded slightly, then shouted to Suzuka again:

"Suzuka! The barrier!"

Suzuka nodded shakily after he instructed. She tried to use magic immediately but was unsuccessful. Anyone who saw her like that wouldn't believe her to be a Divine General.

Then--

"......Right."

Suddenly, Harutora mumbled to himself. Touji, Suzuka, Tenma, and Kyouko inadvertently looked at Harutora in surprise.

"I'll go ask my dad. Even if I can't do it, my dad..... my dad can definitely treat Natsume."

They were realistic, but obviously empty words. Touji's anger suddenly rose.

"Harutora....."

Touji spoke solemnly. Then, Harutora turned to Touji, still slumped on the ground.

His expression was that of someone who had been defeated and was about to be crushed, yet still stood firm in the last moment. The expression of someone who had lost everything but still hung on to the final thread. Touji was helpless before those eyes that might crumble at any moment.

"Isn't that right? My dad's a professional Onmyou doctor, right? Touji, didn't he seal your oni too?"

"Harutora, that's enough."

"Although he's usually joking around, his skills are top-notch. My dad can definitely do it. My dad definitely can."

"Harutora."

"He'll definitely be able to help, even with Natsume. After all, he's a professional Onmyou doctor, a true Onmyouji, different from someone like me! As long as he tries, even someone dead--"

"Harutora!"

He reached his limit. Harutora's expression crumbled with Touji's shout. Also, the thing swirling in Touji's body was spat out along with his angry shout. He felt like there was a hole deep in his chest and felt a numbness surpassing pain.

".....Harutora."

Touji spoke to him again.

Then, he took a breath to let himself calm down, and continued.

"No Onmyouji can resurrect the dead, no matter who."

He said that indifferently, as if convincing himself.

Touji just naturally said the obvious truth.

At some point, the shooting of fireworks had also stopped.

A heavy, depressing silence weighed on everyone present. Touji lowered his head, as if pushed down by that weight.

That was the weight and bitterness of 'reality'. He couldn't escape from it or reject it. He could only accept and endure.

But--

There was some 'twistedness' in that silence. Touji suddenly became conscious of that twistedness as he was immersed in that silence.

He frowned. He noticed that Harutora, who had been staring straight at him until just now, had turned his head.

An undisguised face of one who had been forced into desperation, cutting off everything unnecessary. His eyes held a strange light.

Harutora was staring at Suzuka.

He quickly looked at Suzuka. She had also noticed Harutora's gaze and was looking back. She had a childish, timid expression, but at the base of it was a terror of a different kind from before.

A cold current ran through Touji's back.

The words he had said before hazily reawakened in his mind. The premonition that formed before thinking - the unpleasant, ominous premonition - made his hair rise.

"......Hey."

He hastily spoke up.

"Harutora, you....."

However, the situation didn't wait for Touji to convey his 'suspicions'.

Suddenly, Yukikaze neighed shrilly next to Touji as if to catch his attention. Immediately afterwards, a siren that had been mixed in with the sound of the fireworks before suddenly rushed into the road.

A large black vehicle unlike a sedan and giving off a rough impression appeared. Because of the familiar model, Touji inadvertently took a stance. He didn't even need to look at the words 'Onmyou Agency' stenciled on the body. It was a transporter that spiritual disaster purification teams used.

Black-clothed Onmyouji jumped in twos and threes out of the braking transport. Exorcists. Though they attempted to make a formation as their miasma protection clothing flapped, their movements suddenly became disorderly. The man in front looked at Touji and the others, his eyes widening. "A kid?"

Touji inadvertently clicked his tongue.

Harutora had lost control in the middle of the bustling fireworks festival area. There had been a battle involving first-class magic and even a midair battle after Hokuto was summoned to stop the rampaging Harutora. There would be many witnesses.

More accurately, it had been the Raven's Wing that had lost control, not Harutora. Moreover, the Raven's Wing wasn't a pure magical tool, it was a shikigami. The out-of-control Raven's Wing was originally a mobile spiritual disaster, a Phase Three. It wasn't inexplicable that the Exorcist Bureau had noticed that aura and seen it as a spiritual disaster, or that exorcists - a spiritual disaster purification team - had suddenly come here.

The spiritual disaster purification team that disembarked from the transport still surrounded Touji and the others regardless of the confusion they felt towards the circumstances. Also, their faces changed when they saw Natsume collapsed on the ground and covered in blood.

Exorcists were specialists in spiritual disaster purification and supposedly amateurs in magical battles, but it didn't feel that way from their practiced formation. This was the unwavering pressure given off by professional Onmyouji.

Yukikaze snorted as if asking 'what do we do'. Touji managed to suppress his impulse to click his tongue again.

In any case, there was nothing their group could do now. Rather, it would be beneficial to hand the situation over to adults. Honestly, his faith in the Onmyou Agency had been shaken because of the matter concerning Souma Takiko. She had once said that it was the Onmyou Agency who had attacked Natsume's old home, the Tsuchimikado main family residence. Then, she had appeared in front of Harutora and the others with the Raven's Wing that originally should have been at that residence. Hence he had to conclude that Takiko was associated with the Onmyou Agency and see the two of them as 'bad'.

But the Exorcist Bureau was alright compared to the Onmyou Agency. Even if they were of the same ilk, there was at least one person that he realized he could trust. Kogure Zenjirou of the Twelve Divine Generals. He was a former classmate of Touji's and the others' homeroom teacher, and he knew Harutora, Natsume, and Kyouko. If he successfully got in contact with him, he might seriously listen to their explanation.

Most importantly, if they were entrusted to the Exorcist Bureau's hands - the hands that could be called 'the law', they should be able to stay away from the ominous premonition he had felt earlier.

Touji breathed slowly, putting his hand on Yukikaze's head.

"......Suzuka."

He spoke while raising his hands, showing that he had no intention of resisting.

Upon seeing Touji's attitude, Suzuka also obediently - actually, with an expression even more relieved than his - put her hands up. The exorcists next to them were surprised, perhaps because they knew the 'Child Prodigy'.

Kyouko was still stunned, but he decided that she wasn't in danger upon seeing her appearance. Though Tenma didn't put his hands up, he lowered his head and didn't make any actions of resistance.

But Harutora was different.

Harutora, who had been slumped on the ground until now, reacted to the exorcists surrounding them, his body twisting fiercely. He desperately shook his head, sheltering Natsume, then held her tightly.

"Harutora!"

Touji shouted. But Harutora let it pass by his ears. He glared at the exorcists with bloodshot eyes.

Finally, one of the exorcists took a step forward.

".....We are a spiritual disaster purification team belonging to the Onmyou Agency. We're arresting you all. If you comply, we won't get rough."

He stated their allegiance while proclaiming this. Harutora's breathing quickened and a vicious expression emerged on his face.

Harutora's appearance looked like he was shaken by the confusion and had fallen into a state of panic. But that was wrong. That was just on the surface, and Touji had keenly seen through it. Unlike when he had seemed soulless before, a resolute will had arisen in the heart of the current Harutora.

A dangerous will.

"Harutora! Settle down!"

Touji couldn't help but call out. But it ended up becoming the trigger.

Harutora shot off the ground, quickly extending a hand. What he grabbed was the Raven's Wing that he had originally taken off and thrown away. Fwip. The black outer coat leaped up like a flapping banner or like a living thing. Ripples of golden light billowed over the black fabric. Harutora put on the Raven's Wing and held Natsume's body in his arms.

Touji shouted Harutora's name again.

At the same time, the exorcists put up a barrier.

"Don't move!"

The exorcists barked a warning. The Raven's Wing flapped its hem like a wing.

A gust of wind. The flapping Raven's Wing whipped up a stormy swirl of magical energy. Then black feathers like arrows were released in all directions at the same time as it beat its wings. Those feathers cut the barrier the exorcists had put up into shreds.

The forcefully-broken barrier scattered magical energy into its surroundings. The exorcists along with Touji and the other students immediately dropped to the ground, letting the violent magical energy pass. In that span of time, a black figure flew into the night sky.

Harutora beat his wings like a bird with Natsume in his arms.

"That idiot.....!?"

The exorcists constantly released magic one after another into the sky as Touji gritted his teeth next to them. Most of it was charm magic or simple Unmoving Golden Chains. But the Raven's Wing that wrapped around Harutora deflected them all back or just dispersed them. Their movements were well coordinated, but the Raven's Wing's automatic defense worked perfectly.

The Raven's Wing's outline was absorbed into the night sky in moments and Harutora gradually drew away from them along with Natsume. Touji was instantly assaulted by an intense emotional conflict.

".....Damn!"

Enough, he would leave the thinking until later. Touji rapidly pulled on Yukikaze's reins.

"Suzuka! Come!"

He shouted while mounting the horse, flipping onto it.

It was his second time riding Yukikaze. The veteran shikigami comprehended its rider's intents, leaping into the night sky without needing him to even touch the reins. "Touji-kun!" Tenma's voice was accompanied by shouts and magic that flew from the exorcists, but the white horse easily avoided them.

Suzuka still hadn't caught up with the situation and hadn't acted decisively like Touji. Even so, she tightly shut her eyes in the end, directing the shikigami she still sat on to rise while she generated a large number of new shikigami to throw the scene into chaos. An alternative to a smokescreen. "As expected of her." Touji moved his consciousness towards Harutora ahead of him as he thanked Suzuka in his heart.

"Yukikaze, I'm counting on you!"

After saying this, he vigorously shook the reins.

Part 2

Wind rushed by him immediately after he rose into the air. Touji's hair, from which he had taken off the bandanna, became disheveled. On the other hand, Yukikaze galloped into the air without any fear of the night wind. Right after him was the shikigami Suzuka sat on. It was like a chase scene.

But this chase had been tainted with despair from the very start.

"What are you going to do!?"

"Stop Harutora!"

"How!?"

"I don't know!"

The force of the wind was very strong. Touji and Suzuka's throats became hoarse as they conversed.

In the end, even Touji wasn't sure what to do. But he couldn't just sit still.

In front of him was the darkness of the night along with a giant-winged silhouette faintly illuminated from below by the streetlights. An alien raven. But its flight was still very awkward. It dropped while it tried to glide. It beat its wings chaotically, suddenly swerving and bouncing as if it had stumbled. Its unstable, twisted trajectory seemed to directly portray the feelings of its master.

But at the same time, it was like a wounded, violent, wild beast.

"Damn. That.....

...Idiotic bastard.....!"

Anyway, he would try getting closer. Fortunately, although his movements were clumsy, it seemed like the Raven's Wing was currently under Harutora's control.

Then as long as Harutora didn't tell it to, it wouldn't launch an attack. Of course, he couldn't guarantee that it wouldn't 'counterattack'.

"Yukikaze!"

He shook the reins and Yukikaze sped up again.

He wasn't sure how fast the Raven's Wing normally flew, but Yukikaze steadily closed the distance to the snaking Raven's Wing. As he predicted, there were no attacks aimed at him, but he could feel that the Raven's Wing was alerted to his presence, even if Harutora wasn't.

"Harutora!"

Touji leaned out and yelled.

"Calm down! Land for now! Harutora!"

"....."

Though he shouted, Harutora didn't give him a reply. Yukikaze accelerated again, getting side by side with the Raven's Wing. Then, Suzuka's shikigami circled around to the other side of Harutora as Touji was. When they had created a formation with the Raven's Wing in the middle, Suzuka yelled: "Bakatora!"

But Harutora didn't stop.

Just then, the Raven's Wing suddenly swerved and Yukikaze dipped to the side almost simultaneously. Touji, who was leaning to the side, hastily grabbed the reins tightly. Immediately after, narrow figures tore through the night sky, flitting past the rapidly-swerving Raven's Wing.

Gray swallows. They were 'WA1 Swallow Whips'. Moreover, there wasn't just one. After it was a second, then a third. When Touji hastily stabilized his position on the

dodging Yukikaze, a total of ten Swallow Whips were dancing centered on the Raven's Wing. "What!?" Touji couldn't help but gape.

"A Mystical Investigator? Here!?"

Swallow Whips belonged to the ranks of manmade shikigami and were called binding shikigami as they were in a specific category. It was a manmade shikigami designed for the Mystical Crime Investigation Department whose main use was to capture magic-using criminals. Most of the time, Mystical Investigators didn't mistake their target practitioner.

"Careful!"

Suzuka shouted a warning in a panic.

"These things are modified! They're basically different things!"

'Swallow Whips' were commercially available manmade shikigami created by the Witchcraft Corporation. But it wasn't strange for Mystical Investigators to personally make various minor adjustments in most cases before use.

But it seemed like, as Suzuka had predicted, that the magic of the high-speed Swallow Whips flying before them had been heavily modified. Indeed, Touji had seen this kind of binding shikigami several times but the Swallow Whips before him now felt different from the things he had seen before. Their mobility and most importantly their coordinated movements as a group of ten were different.

"Could it be.....!?"

...They were being controlled by one person?

As if responding to his suspicion, the ten Swallow Whips moved together, surrounding the Raven's Coat like a pair of hands.

They kept a close distance to the irregularly-flying Raven's Wing, maintaining their surrounding formation completely orderly. Their group mobility made them seem like a single organism.

Ten gray swallows surrounding a giant raven.

Moreover, it was like a group of hyenas hunting a wild beast. Though they wouldn't attack directly, they stayed on his tail. Even if the Raven's Wing bat its wings powerfully trying to shake them off, they were able to dodge easily and lightly as if entrusting themselves to the wind, and it couldn't even touch them. Suzuka's eyes widened at those ingenuous movements.

"How is that possible? They're not dodging automatically. Long-distance control? At this height? How can that be?"

"Suzuka! Can you trace the practitioner from the magical energy?"

"I-I'll try!"

The fact that they weren't sure who was controlling these shikigami made him uncomfortable. If he thought about it properly, it was probably someone from the Mystical Investigators, but how could he have gotten wind of this? No, come to think of it, Harutora and the others had been monitored by unknown people when they had been at the male dorm. Had it been a mistaken judgment that they had called off their surveillance for now?

...Damn. What should they do!?

He wanted to stop Harutora, but he couldn't act recklessly since he didn't understand the goal of the practitioner controlling the Swallow Whips before him. Suzuka was trying to search for the location of the practitioner, but tracking things back to the practitioner required extraordinary technique and her current strength was limited

because of her seal. Though she was focusing on her surroundings, tracking down magical energy was a strenuous effort.

Then, while Touji and Suzuka were tied up, the Raven's Wing - Harutora - was the first to move.

"...Don't get in the way!"

With a flap, the Raven's Wing's lower hem spread open like an explosion, stopping immediately. Yukikaze and Suzuka's shikigami were taken by surprise and passed by Harutora, immediately turning back. The swallows also overshot him and their formation was ruined, but they corrected their trajectories with the slightest adjustments and continued chasing the Raven's Wing. But the Raven's Wing spread its lower hem again, rising into a higher space before they recomposed their formation.

The Raven's Wing repeated this complex maneuver, drawing out an arc while rotating downwards. The ten Swallow Whips accurately followed its movements, agilely chasing after it. Never mind the latter, but the movements of the former really didn't feel like the movements of a human carrying another. Every time the bottom hem of the Raven's Wing billowed like a wing, golden light danced in the night sky like stardust.

But the swallows were not inferior by comparison. They didn't all make the same movements, but rather subtly changed their formation while steadily approaching the Raven's Wing. Similarly, the Raven's Wing didn't give them any opportunity to flank it. "Ridiculous." Touji suppressed his restless mood.

Then, it was time for the Swallow Whips to act.

Two of them spread their wings at the same time, their feathers 'stretching'. Like their name, their wings became several whips, covering the Raven's Wing. They

carried out the 'binding' that was the shikigamis' original usage. The Raven's Wing viewed this as an 'attack'. Making use of a momentary opportunity to slip through the whips that extended from the two binding shikigami, its hem flashed. The front of the Raven's Wing's wing instantly turned into a sharp blade, cutting apart the Swallow Whips' wings with one slash.

However, the Swallow Whips - the practitioner controlling the group of shikigami - wasn't concerned about the shikigamis' wounds. After the first two, the swallows that were left started going to catch the Raven's Wing in twos and threes.

The whips extending from the gray swallows approached. The Raven's Wing flitted around to its heart's content, shredding them all. Complex, mechanical, and precise. In the eyes of the observers, it looked like some sort of performance.

Lag flashed across the cut Swallow Whips and they stopped moving.

But.

...What's going on? That's strange.

The Raven's Wing continued counterattacking, but the enemy numbers didn't decrease. The cut Swallow Whips stopped from lag and then immediately flapped their wings to return to the formation. Moreover, the places they had been cut in had already recovered by the time they returned to the next wave of attacks. Of course, this was a function that ordinary Swallow Whips couldn't possibly have.

Their means of attack slowly became stronger as well. The number of shikigami simultaneously extending whips went from two to three and then four. A continuous attack without any gaps. Alongside, the Raven's Wing's responses started becoming sluggish.

Then, the moment one finally entangled it, the other nine instantly flitted towards the Raven's Wing which prepared to escape upwards. Though the Raven's Wing

fended off two of them, the other swallows all transformed into whips, binding up the Raven's Wing along with Harutora and Natsume.

"Harutora!?"

The Raven's Wing lost its flight ability like a bird caught in a net, starting to fall freely in a parabola. Touji and Suzuka hastily chased behind it. At some point, the scenery below them had changed from residential streets to roads with masses of buildings. The Raven's Wing hurtled towards the wall of one of them. Touji desperately shook the reins, but he would be too late.

He was going to collide.

In the moment he believed that:

"...Noumaku saraba tatagyateibyaku saraba bokkeibyaku sarabata tarata senda makarosyada ken gyakigyaki saraba biginnan untarata kanman...!

Harutora's incantation. It was the Fire Realm magic. At the same time, the Raven's Wing was covered in flame, and the Swallow Whips binding its wings were incinerated.

"Gah!?"

Fire spilled forth and Touji shut his eyes. The flame blooming in the night sky instantly burned away all of the shikigami. The Raven's Wing's lower hem flapped in order to clear away their remains. It barrel rolled, avoiding colliding with the building by a hair's breadth. But its movement was even more bizarre than before its struggle. It faltered and dropped down.

Touji urged Yukikaze on, dashing up to the Raven's Wing in a flash. "Harutora!" he shouted loudly, checking his appearance.

Harutora glided while desperately staring ahead of him. There was no calm in his eyes. Though he planned on telling him to first land, but judging by the current situation, it was likely that carelessly landing would result in a fall.

Just then--

"Headband! There!"

Suzuka, who closed in from the side, pointed an arm and shouted loudly. Upon careful observation, there was a building in construction ahead of them. The highest floor had no outer wall, and its steel skeleton was exposed.

The height was perfect. The moment he considered that, Touji powerfully urged Yukikaze on.

He had the horse slide in the forward path of the gliding Raven's Wing. "Stop." Harutora's eyes widened and he stopped the Raven's Wing that reflexively tried to attack, changing his trajectory. Hence, he rushed into the unfinished building approaching them from the front.

"!?"

Harutora held on to Natsume with both hands. At the same time, the Raven's Wing shot out in front of him to absorb the impact. He managed to pass through the gap between the reinforcements and land on the floor.

Harutora slid across the floor, carrying Natsume and wrapped by the black coat. Yukikaze followed right after him, landing on the ground and slowing down as the clacks of its horseshoes rang out.

Harutora and Natsume, covered by the Raven's Coat, crashed through the building materials placed nearby as they slid, only stopping when they were near the center

of the floor. Then, they collapsed on their side, exhausted. Touji breathed deeply, lightly patting Yukikaze's neck and stepping down to the floor to approach Harutora.

Harutora shakily raised his upper body, but even so, he also tried to shelter the motionless Natsume. He panted for breath, his shoulders moving up and down. Though he was mentally and physically exhausted, for now he didn't look injured.

Touji sternly spoke to his one-year-younger friend with a reproachful tone:

"Harutora."

Harutora lowered his head, continuing to pant.

"Harutora!"

"....."

Boom. The night air rumbled. Harutora cringed as if startled, but the still didn't plan on looking up, nor was he prepared to reply to Touji.

The shikigami Suzuka rode glided in next to the two of them. Suzuka looked at the pair, Harutora with his head lowered and Touji glaring at him, and dismounting wordlessly from the shikigami.

Touji glanced at Suzuka out of the corner of his eye.

".....The practitioner?"

"Sorry....."

It seemed that she hadn't been able to find the person controlling the Swallow Whips in the end. "I see." Touji didn't blame Suzuka, he just quietly uttered those words.

Then, as if noticing Suzuka's presence because of the dialogue, the bowed Harutora suddenly turned his head.

He put his strength into his shaking knees, standing up with a ghastly expression. Then, he rushed towards the timid Suzuka, grabbing her slim shoulders with both hands.

"Suzuka."

Harutora stared straight into Suzuka's eyes.

Then, he spoke those words.

"Suzuka. The Taizan Fukun Ritual. The Taizan Fukun Ritual can revive Natsume. Just like how you wanted to do before, if we use the Taizan Fukun Ritual....."

He spoke in a vicious tone.

The ugliness of someone who had succumbed to his delusions - and also one whose soul cried out.

"Get a grip, Harutora!"

Touji bellowed angrily, but Harutora didn't listen, staring only at Suzuka. His hands that grabbed Suzuka's shoulders constantly trembled, but he definitely didn't let her escape.

"Please."

"No."

Suzuka replied immediately.

Her voice that burst out in a wail was cowardly, unbefitting of her usual behavior.

"Suzuka."

"No! Don't..... Don't joke around! What are you saying!?"

"I'm not joking, I'm serious."

"Shut up! H-Have you forgotten what you said to me back then?"

Suzuka spoke as if hurling her words, the light of teardrops flashing in the corners of her eyes. He feared that things had developed as he predicted when Harutora escaped from the exorcists.

However, Suzuka herself still hadn't recovered from the shock of Natsume's death. The scattered words from her mouth trembled because of her wavering and the sound of her desperately crying out pained him.

"You stopped me like it was natural when I was being arrogant back then! Now you plan on turning away so easily when it's your turn? How could you! How could you! There should be a limit to selfishness! You're, you're despicable!"

It was basically a sob at the end. Harutora had no intention of letting go of the whimpering Suzuka.

Suzuka glared at Harutora with her tearful eyes.

"First..... First off, what about the price? What are you going to do about the cost of the ritual!? Whose life are you going to use for Natsume's.....!"

Her final question was filled with terror, as she already knew the answer.

Harutora answered clearly after a short silence.

"I'll die."

"Don't talk nonsense!"

"I'm not speaking nonsense. Natsume..... I caused her to die, so that's natural compensation."

Touji didn't need to see his eyes at all. He was speaking completely seriously.

"Suzuka, please. I'm begging you."

Harutora put strength into his hands as he pleaded from the bottom of his heart. Suzuka's eyes widened and tears started trickling from her eyes. She shook her head back and forth while crying. Refusal - but even so, she couldn't escape Harutora's hands.

He couldn't keep on watching.

Touji reached out a hand wordlessly, putting it on Harutora's arm. The Raven's Wing didn't react, but Harutora kept clutching Suzuka's shoulders, not planning on backing down.

Touji spoke, seemingly murmuring to himself:

".....Is it fine to leave Natsume in that kind of place?"

He could feel Harutora trembling underneath the fabric of the Raven's Wing. His strength receded. Touji slowly moved Harutora's hand from Suzuka's shoulder.

After his right hand moved away, his left hand naturally left her shoulder. Suzuka stood still, sniffling.

In the next moment.

The Raven's Wing, which had been idle, suddenly fluttered. It pointed its hem towards the corner of the room, like a snake rearing its head into a sickle shape.

"...My, I apologize for disturbing you while you're busy."

A voice sounded. Touji, Suzuka, and Harutora turned their heads in surprise.

The figure of a young man slowly appeared in the darkness.

A trendy young man wearing slacks and a shirt paired with a vest. No, it would be better to call him a boy than a young man. His age looked to be about the same as

Touji's. But he didn't instinctively feel like a 'human'. He was probably a shikigami. Moreover, his presence wasn't that of a manmade shikigami. A servant shikigami.

Carefully-kept black hair and untanned white skin. He wore an ascot and white gloves. He was dressed like an old aristocrat, but the most remarkable thing about him was the round lens set over his right eye. It was probably a monocle.

Then, Suzuka froze the moment she saw that monocle.

"......No way."

She let out a hoarse voice as if this were a joke.

Touji and Harutora instantly took up stances, confronting the man who appeared before them. But the man didn't care, leisurely drawing close and then stopping.

With a calm face, the man smiled refreshingly and said:

"Nice to meet the other two of you. I'm Yashamaru, please look after me."

Part 3

A monocle from the wrong time period.

But Suzuka had recollections of that monocle. It was something that she wanted to forget but couldn't.

It wasn't just that monocle. That clothing, voice, and appearance. The age was completely different, but there were too many similarities. Even the aura wrapped around him was the same. This was impossible. Definitely impossible. Because he was already dead. Dead. Since two years ago.

But her instincts sharply cut off her weakly-protesting reasoning.

"......Father....."

There was a momentary lag before Harutora and Touji reacted. Her words were outdated and the tone wasn't like her style. Their understandings weren't able to catch up immediately.

Their expressions didn't look like they understood the 'implication' in Suzuka's words. That was natural. Because she herself didn't understand what was going on.

The male who called himself Yashamaru smiled slightly.

"Suzuka."

He called out to her in an extremely natural tone.

"This is a bit sudden, but even though I wanted to spend a bit more time on our reunion, this way might have its own drama."

"....."

The way he spoke was also completely the same. He was completely identical. Even if he had grown this much younger, the personality at his core hadn't changed.

"But I can't have you calling me 'father'. It can't be helped that you're surprised, but you're also an independent practitioner. You have to correctly interpret things no matter when it is. Most importantly, you shouldn't 'curse' yourself so easily. I want to be a bit strict with you, but you're still very clumsy in dealing with second-class magic. Pay attention."

Suzuka's knees inadvertently started shaking because of his happy, gentle instructive attitude.

She slowly started sweating and her willpower shrank. It was like a frog being stared down by a snake. She felt rejection, a desire to escape, and terror, but she couldn't even resist. Because obedience had already been carved into her soul.

"......Suzuka? What's going on?"

Touji asked, watching Yashamaru. But she couldn't reply. Touji glanced quizzically at Suzuka's appearance. After realizing that she wasn't in a state where she could seriously make a reply, he immediately turned his attention in front of him.

"......Yashamaru, huh."

His murmured words were mixed with a tense tone that was more than irony.

"So? That 'father', is it your nickname, or something else?"

"Hahaha, what a pleasant thought. But the answer is no. I'm quite sorry, but it means what it means."

"Hmph. That's very strange then. No matter how good you are at dressing young, you don't look old enough to be Suzuka's father, and before that, you're a shikigami, not a human, right? What's more, as far as I know, Suzuka only had one father and that man should have died already."

Touji carefully piled up questions as if he were calculating the distance between him and his enemy. Just then, "Yes." Yashamaru affirmed with a straightforward and undisguised attitude.

"So, what exactly is going on?"

"Just like I warned her about just now, her words were not correct. Let me introduce myself. My name is Yashamaru. My name in my previous life was Dairenji Shidou. Though I died two years ago, I was resurrected as a shikigami. Anyway, that's what's going on."

Yashamaru spoke simply. Touji, Harutora, and Suzuka forgot to breathe in their stupors.

Dairenji Shidou. A National First-Class Onmyouji called the 'Professor' - a member of the Twelve Divine Generals.

He was also the father of the 'Child Prodigy' Dairenji Suzuka, the chief of the closed-down Imperial Household Agency Lingering Spirit Division, and had once been a central member of the Twin-Horned Syndicate. Also, he was the mastermind behind the 'Hinamatsuri Great Purification' spiritual disaster terrorist attack two years ago.

Dairenji Shidou had been drawn into the spiritual disaster he caused and died in the terrorist attack. Just like how he himself had admitted.

But.....

".....Resurrected? .....Shikigami?"

Suzuka moaned, stunned.

Yashamaru put his white-gloved hands on his hips and said lightly:

"Isn't it amazing?"

His attitude was somewhat sarcastic and didn't have an ounce of tension, greatly contrasting with the three people he confronted.

He really hadn't changed. Nothing had changed. He didn't have anything special and he hadn't lost anything. His usual leisureliness and randomness. His soul was dyed in a trivial and dishonest atmosphere.

But Suzuka knew more than anyone else.

Her father was 'tyrannical' since as far back as she could remember. Wrapped in that atmosphere, he indifferently used her and her brother as experiments, repeatedly performing magical research. During her childhood, he had casually used multiple prohibited magics just 'for fun'. Suzuka had observed this with her own eyes.

This man's 'leisureliness' was directly linked with the 'danger' he presented. There was a thoroughly calm brutality beneath that loose aristocratic atmosphere. He had wisdom, knowledge, and powerful 'strength' as a practitioner.

"In any case, the 'current me' is called Yashamaru, not Dairenji Shidou. Strictly speaking, I'm a different person - though it's also very strange to say that. Because I'm not 'human'."

"....."

Suzuka felt light-headed.

An unpleasant feeling as if her head was spinning, even though it was obvious nothing had happened. Moreover, there was a roaring deep in her ears. Her sense of balance vanished and she mistakenly felt the ground beneath her feet crumble. She couldn't breathe properly.

...He died..... He died..... Dead..... and then.....

He had been resurrected? What kind of absurdity - No. Even she had spoken of the possibilities in that area.

The Taizan Fukun Ritual.

Dairenji Shidou - her father - had been the highest-ranking member of the old Lingering Spirit Division. And the Lingering Spirit Division was a department established to research the 'mitama' called ara-mitama and nigi-mitama.

In General Onmyoudou, which had been established with a strong exclusion of religious concepts, 'mitama' referred to 'souls that had become spiritual disasters'. Right now, magic related to souls was designated as prohibited magic, but the Lingering Spirit Division was the department that had tread the farthest into the prohibition. The so-called Taizan Fukun Ritual was exactly 'soul-controlling magic'.

More importantly, her father had once been a central member of the Twin-Horned Syndicate, a secret society of Yakou believers. One could say that her father was in a position where he was more knowledgeable than anyone else about the Taizan Fukun Ritual, a resurrection ritual that Yakou had incorporated into his own system of magic.

Suzuka had actually tried to use the Taizan Fukun Ritual in the past and had followed the research that the Lingering Spirit Division had conducted. No, more accurately, it was a portion of that research. Half of the Lingering Spirit Division's research results had been lost due to the spiritual disaster terrorist attack. Even Suzuka wasn't clear 'how close' the Lingering Spirit Division - her father - had gotten to Yakou's Taizan Fukun Ritual. She couldn't assert that something like reviving as a shikigami after death was impossible.

"......Dairenji Shidou..... The real one, huh....."

Touji's voice shook as he murmured. Right. Suzuka remembered.

The oni in Touji's body. That was the thing he had been 'possessed' by due to being dragged into the spiritual disaster her father caused. To Touji, her father was the culprit who had twisted his life.

Then--

"Right."

A cold smile emerged on Yashamaru's face and he looked happily at Touji.

"To tell the truth, I greatly looked forward to meeting you, Ato Touji-kun. I heard of your situation, and it seems like I've caused a lot of trouble for you."

"....."

"Haha, alright, don't glare at me. I'm very interested in the 'demon' in your body, as after all it seems that we've happened to end up in the same boat."

".....What did you say? What does that mean?"

"That we've obtained 'the same blessings'."

Yashamaru grinned, pointing lightly at Touji with an index finger of his crossed arms.

"Let me first say that it's quite a valuable thing, you know? Non-related humans matching by chance is a rare miracle. To be honest, I think there's no reason not to pay attention. You're very interested too, right?"

"....."

Touji carefully avoided replying to Yashamaru's provocative words. The fact that he was uncharacteristically alert might be proof that he innately sensed the 'danger' that Yashamaru posed.

Needless to say, Suzuka didn't miss a word. What he had said just now. Her father knew about the oni that possessed Touji's body. Moreover, according to what he had just said, it seemed like Touji's oni wasn't the same as a simple spiritual disaster. The same boat. The same blessings? What was going on? How much had her father.....

"Then--"

Ignoring Suzuka's shaking, Yashamaru continued speaking as he pleased. After parting his crossed arms, he put his right hand to his chest and turned his body to face Harutora face-to-face.

"...Needless to say, I was also extremely looking forward to meeting you. But more accurately, that's the 'current you'. If I may be so rude to say so, I didn't pay much attention to 'Tsuchimikado Harutora-kun' before. That was up until a few hours ago."

Yashamaru grinned after saying this.

A handsome and deluded smile. A demonic smile that was only eye-catching because of the darkness it harbored deep within.

"Then, how should I address the soul of such a great Onmyouji? From what I saw before, it's no longer the standard 'North Star King', right? Should I simply call you 'Lord Yakou'?"

The air quickly chilled. It was as if the truth that Suzuka and Touji forcefully avoided thinking about had become an invisible block of ice and chilled the surrounding air.

The truth that Souma Takiko had told them of and proved with the Raven's Wing.

Tsuchimikado Yakou's reincarnation.

Suzuka couldn't see Harutora's expression from her position. Harutora was currently still wrapped in the Raven's Wing - the clothing that Tsuchimikado Yakou was generally believed to wear often - as he listened to Yashamaru's words. Perhaps

because of that, the Harutora currently before Suzuka seemed like a different person from the Harutora she knew.

...Bakatora.....!

Her throat was dry. Suzuka clenched her fists tightly, staring at Harutora's back.

Harutora's back slowly began to twitch.

"...My name is Harutora, Tsuchimikado Harutora."

The tension in Suzuka's heart was alleviated the instant she heard those words. A slight smile also flashed over Touji's mouth.

In contrast--

"......Hmph."

Yashamaru's expression changed.

But he immediately returned to his former attitude.

"Understood. Then let me greet you again. Tsuchimikado Harutora-kun, I'm very happy to meet you. Please pardon my rude greeting, I just couldn't wait. After all, the previous me could be called the greatest authority on Yakou. I thought about him while awake and asleep."

Yashamaru spoke elegantly while staring at Harutora with a composed expression. That attitude was sleek and gentlemanly, definitely not the one of a hypocrite, but that was just a part of her father's nature - just the surface.

"Moreover, it was later that I was going to offer my hand to you. So I was actually planning on watching quietly for a while longer..... But things turned out decently well. Well, I tried acting independently like this."

After Suzuka heard this, she immediately understood her father's intent. Goosebumps rose all over her body.

She cried out almost instinctively.

".....B-Bakatora!"

She had the courage to try and stop her father to his face. The Suzuka from before definitely couldn't have done this.

But.

"Don't listen to him! Th-This guy's the leader of the Twin-Horned Syndicate! He's the one who got the Yakou believers to carry out a terrorist attack!"

She shouted desperately. She was scared, so scared that she was at her limit, but the 'developments' that might follow if she didn't speak were even more frightening and hard to accept.

Then, the moment her shrieking voice finished shouting, she felt her father's chains that had tied her down until now slightly loosen. Right, she was already different from before. She wasn't an experimental subject of the 'Professor', she was the 'Child Prodigy' Dairenji Suzuka.

Yashamaru said with a wry smile:

"Hey, hey, Suzuka, you get along quite will with Harutora-kun, huh? You should invite him to join us if you want to be with him."

Suzuka felt furious at her father's words. What did he mean, 'us'. In her father's heart, Suzuka was still on his side - no, she was 'below' him. She couldn't forgive how he so naturally considered Suzuka to be in the same camp as him.

".....Don't be ridiculous!"

She compressed her anger and hatred and spat it out. Though there was still fear in her voice, she couldn't let her heart be warped. She did her best to glare at her father who had taken a displeased expression.

Just then--

"......First, there are two things I want to confirm."

It was Touji who suddenly interjected from the side. Yashamaru replied pleasantly:

"What are they?"

Touji gathered his expression and said:

"The shikigami from before were yours?"

"Ho, starting from the conclusion is one of my favorite speaking techniques. You're talking about the 'WA1'? Yes, that was me."

After saying this, Yashamaru slowly reached his index and middle finger into the pocket of his vest. He drew out a folded charm with a slow motion as if teasing the vigilant Touji.

A shikigami charm. With the flick of a finger, an owl was summoned.

It was the 'W12 Owl Eye' created by the Witchcraft Corporation. It was a shikigami called detection-type, a manmade shikigami that shared its five senses with the practitioner's for long-distance investigation and similar situations. But just like the Swallow Whips from before, this 'Owl Eye' had been extensively modified. In particular, its feathers - and its body - appeared black.

Unlike the inorganic, mechanical shikigami that the Onmyou Agency created, the majority of the Witchcraft Corporation's shikigami had the shape of real animals. Hence, their exteriors were blue in order to indicate that they were shikigami. This color change was a requirement from the Onmyou Agency and had become a

fundamental standard associated with the magic. Since the 'Owl Eye' Yashamaru summoned had been changed left and right, it could be described as already a different shikigami than the commercially available product.

Then, Suzuka regretfully cried out "Ah" the instant she saw the black owl. It was because she realized the trick Yashamaru had used to control the group of Swallow Whips. He had probably had the black Owl Eye concealed in the night sky and observed the ins and outs of the situation. The control of the Swallow Whips' flight had to have been coordinated through this detection-type shikigami.

Yashamaru raised his right arm. After the black Owl Eye flapped its wings a couple times, it stopped on its master's arm. Its round owl eyes that flashed in the darkness seemed related to the lens of his monocle.

"......And your goal?"

Touji asked.

"Haha, I don't really want to say it because I feel like I'll be hated, but the biggest reason was because I wanted to be 'meddlesome'."

Yashamaru laughed apologetically. Perhaps those were his true feelings.

But on the other hand, it was her father's style to absolutely never act without calculating the value of the action.

"I showed myself for the same reasons. Though I endured it at the start, the Exorcist Bureau ended up stepping in..... I wanted to try my hand no matter what. Actually, I do gain something. Originally, commercially available manmade shikigami with slight modifications shouldn't have been able to match you even in a group if you were wearing the Raven's Wing. That serves as proof that Harutora-kun still hasn't regained his 'original' power. Your original power..... or your memories. Well, that's why I appeared so cheekily like this - I can't deny that."

He spoke with a disorganized manner of speech from start to finish.

Just then--

"Original?"

Harutora leaned forward, perhaps because he couldn't turn a deaf ear to this. Suzuka still couldn't glimpse Harutora's expression from her perspective, but a dense restlessness with nowhere to be vented radiated from his voice and attitude.

"Didn't you hear? I'm--"

"Got it. Next question."

Touji forcibly continued, stopping Harutora as he gritted his teeth.

Harutora's uncharacteristically aggressive attitude proved that he was still mentally distressed, as expected. In contrast, Touji felt somehow adept. Even if he was far from Suzuka's level as a practitioner, she might be unable to match him when it came to tenacity and mental fortitude.

"You're a shikigami, right? That means you have a master, right?"

Suzuka was taken aback by that question. She hadn't thought that far either.

On the other hand, "Of course." Yashamaru replied simply.

Touji grinned - a sinister smile.

"I see, then next question. Actually, we had a spat with the master of a shikigami named Kumomaru just recently. It's pretty easy to associate you with that shikigami called Kumomaru, so could you be related?"

Harutora's body stiffened because of Touji's question, and Suzuka almost gasped.

As a result, Yashamaru nodded admiringly.

"Nice instincts. Perhaps I've indeed struck gold. ...It's true. Kumomaru and I serve the same master. My master is Souma Takiko, the Souma clan's prin--"

cess - Touji moved before his word was finished.

"First seal, release!"

He yelled, transforming into an oni in a flash and closing the distance.

"Wha!?"

Touji's charging body was covered in samurai armor before Suzuka's eyes could even widened in suprise. Touji charged with animosity towards Yashamaru.

He started the negotiations himself, then single handily cut them off with a surprise attack. Suzuka was caught completely off guard, but Yashamaru still smiled, taking him head-on without dodging.

Crash. The impact went through the floor. Yashamaru, who defended against Touji's attack with a single arm, swiftly swung the arm he had defended with. "Tch!" Touji was sent flying and righted himself in the air. Suzuka was stunned - but Harutora wasn't. He immediately followed up his partner's surprise attack.

"Order!"

He ran to the side and threw a charm - one of the charms he still had left - from behind him. He had already formed a hand seal and moved on to Unmoving Golden Chains when the charm was forming vines. Needless to say, the Raven's Wing had also entered a battle state, and was on guard for Yashamaru's attacks.

"My, oh my."

Yashamaru laughed happily.

"Making a decision without thinking it through. How young. ...Alright."

Yashamaru's figure vanished.

In the next moment, the samurai-form Touji was sent flying by a straight kick.

His back suddenly crashed into an exposed steel beam. "Gah!?" Lag occurred on the armor covering Touji - at the moment, Yashamaru rapidly turned, leaping towards Harutora. He engaged Harutora's Unmoving Golden Chains. Yashamaru didn't dodge, nor did he dematerialize. After taking the magic that bound his entire body, he forcefully shattered it.

The Raven's Wing's lower hem darted out, slashing several blades at the midair Yashamaru. However, the shikigami deflected them all with the palm of his hand,

landing deftly in front of Harutora. The Raven's Wing forced its master back before that moment.

"...Yeah, it seems like you really aren't back to your former state."

But Yashamaru commented with a relaxed expression, leaning forward and easily closing the distance with a brisk pace.

"Ugh!?"

Harutora backed far off again. As if to cover that movement, Touji threw a bag of concrete piled nearby at Yashamaru. But Yashamaru instantly dematerialized and appeared behind Harutora's back.

The Raven's Wing ferociously slashed with all its power at the hand on its shoulder. Yashamaru deliberately laughed out loud, avoiding the slash of the billowing Raven's Wing by dodging backwards.

"Whew."

He sharply exhaled, throwing a fierce right straight.

The lithe, whip-like blow shook the night air around it. Harutora was sent flying into the air like paper along with the Raven's Wing that instantly defended him.

The Raven's Wing extended its hem and wrapped around a reinforcement and Harutora managed to land on the ground. Touji roared and rushed closer to replace him, but Yashamaru stepped on the ground with a "tsk tsk", moving left and right with hopping steps and beautifully avoiding the successive attacks.

"I was pretty good when I was young, you know?"

Yashamaru lightly raised his fists with a cold smile, taking a boxing stance.

But he opened his fist very quickly.

"But needless to say, I do this now. ...Om jirijiri sowaka."

He formed a Rakshasa seal with his white-gloved fingers. Black fog sprayed out, entwining around Touji and constricted his movements. "Ugh!?" Yashamaru shrugged in front of Touji as he clenched his teeth.

"...म..."

A seed syllable. The seed syllable of Mahamayuri's mantra. The mantra pummeled the ensnared Touji, sending him flying again.

Harutora released charm magic without a pause.

"Hm, how rude."

With those words, he very quickly rendered the magic ineffective. He ignored the stunned Harutora and acted before the Raven's Wing defended automatically.

"On bishibishi karakara shibari sowaka."

Unmoving Golden Chains.

The tongue-twisting chant seemed to lack motivation, but the magical energy it was infused with was immense.

The Unmoving Golden Chains bound the Raven's Wing along with Harutora. Harutora collapsed to the ground, and on the other hand, Touji shakily stood up after being hit head-on by the seed syllable mantra. But the armor covering his body was undergoing intense lag and constantly flickered. Never mind continuing to fight, he was in a dangerous state where he had to immediately release his demonic transformation.

The victor was decided.

Suzuka had only been able to watch with wide eyes during that time.

"......Well?"

Pat, pat. Yashamaru leisurely wiped dust off of himself, still smiling gently.

"Though this has its own fun, it's a bit empty. Please allow me to express my apologies for the princess - my master Souma Takiko - getting carried away. But that's quite a different matter, no? Why don't you try seriously considering walking the path of Onmyoudou with us?"

He spoke extremely seriously. Again, it was unbelievable.

"Of course, my apology will be accompanied by reparations. I'm extremely sorry for the abnormal negotiations, but consider the Taizan Fukun Ritual. It might be a bit much for me to say this, but you could call me the world authority on soul magic, especially the Taizan Fukun Ritual. I myself am evidence. Harutora-kun, I won't tell you to do anything inconsiderate like give up your life. Though there might be some 'additional conditions' I'd definitely be able to beautifully awaken that girl - your substitute decoy, Tsuchimikado Natsume."

Yashamaru spoke cheerfully to the motionless Harutora.

Suzuka pressed her lips together. The proposal just now was one thing to Harutora, but it bothered her to the extreme. Her regret could grow no larger.

Moreover, Yashamaru also spoke to Touji.

"You too, Touji-kun. Your strength can only bloom in the truest sense under my guidance. I hope that you will 'call on' us. Also, if you refuse no matter what..... then there's no helping it, I'll help you by reclaiming that oni. Though you were tossed around for two years, you were originally someone unrelated to this world. It's not too late to regain your life as an ordinary person. You will decide everything."

Touji had decided to become an Onmyouji to deal with the oni inside him. Yashamaru's proposal was related to Touji's aspirations.

Then--

Yashamaru didn't speak to Suzuka.

To her father, Suzuka's fate had been decided from the start.

After saying this, Yashamaru released the Unmoving Golden Chains from Harutora. Harutora rose while breathing roughly, but didn't take any further actions.

The Owl Eye flapped its wings and flew above his head. It seemed that it had temporarily retreated outside the building during the battle. The black owl returned to its master's side, descending to its master's shoulder.

After the last flap of the owl's wings, a stifling, despair-filled silence pervaded the area.

Harutora, Touji, and Suzuka didn't even move a finger. A cold smile emerged on Yashamaru's face as he stared at the group.

None of them knew how long passed.

Suddenly, the entire unfinished building was covered by a barrier. Paying no heed to the panicked Suzuka and the others, Yashamaru calmly and formally nodded.

"It seems like the spiritual disaster purification teams from before have finally caught up. Alright, I'll depart for tonight."

Unexpected words. But Yashamaru broke out into a smile in front of the surprised Suzuka and others.

"It might be an effect from becoming a shikigami, but I've been jumping to conclusions much more than in my previous life. Well, I hope that you consider my

proposal again. All of you..... especially Harutora-kun. I'm looking forward to what kind of answers you'll give."

But Yashamaru continued mischievously.

"There's one precarious matter at hand. Tsuchimikado Natsume died without any preparations at all. I hope that you remember that even if you prepare to carry out the Taizan Fukun Ritual, your time is extremely limited, and there's no time to be confused. Understood?"

After those final words, Yashamaru straightened his back without waiting for a reply or reaction from Suzuka and the others.

He elegantly posed and bowed politely. Then - he vanished without a sound.

He dematerialized. Moreover, it was the close-to-perfect stealth that only a shikigami could perform. Though this building should have been locked down by the exorcists' barrier, it seemed like it didn't pose him any problem. The remaining Owl Eye flapped its wings and returned to a charm, burning to ash with a crackle. With that, all traces of Yashamaru disappeared.

Seconds later, searchlights shining from the side illuminated Suzuka, Harutora, and Touji.

"This is the Exorcist Bureau's fifth team! Tsuchimikado Harutora, Ato Touji, and Dairenji Suzuka. Surrender obediently! Resistance will not be tolerated!"

Leather shoes pattered on the floor as the spiritual disaster purification team ran up towards the floor Suzuka and the others were on. Just like Yashamaru said, it was the exorcists from before. From the way they purposefully announced their names, they probably already had Kyouko and Tenma, who had stayed behind, in custody and had obtained that information there. The positions of those two would worsen if they recklessly resisted.

"......!"

Bang. Touji hit the floor. A long crack went through the concrete.

"......Reboot." But afterwards, Touji chanted the incantation as if he were exhaling all the air from his body.

Suzuka abruptly slumped on the ground. Harutora lowered his head, staggering. The exorcists called for him to stop, but he didn't listen to them.

In front of him..... was Natsume.

"......Natsume."

His moan was wet with tears.

Natsume's corpse silently and motionlessly lay there.

Afterwards, the Exorcist Bureau's fifth team arrested Tsuchimikado Harutora, Ato Touji, and Dairenji Suzuka.

They also collected the remains of Tsuchimikado Natsume.

The exorcists had blocked off the area around the unfinished building. Onlookers gathered in the surroundings, wondering about the commotion.

On the other side of the road, away from those onlookers.

"......I was really stupid for expecting something out of that one-armed oni."

An extremely small girl secretly looked over the area from the shadows. She looked to be a middle-schooler at most, with an outer appearance that made it very easy for her to be sent to guidance counselling if she were caught walking on the road alone at this hour.

However - putting aside the Onmyou Agency for now - the police hadn't been able to 'notice' her yet. The girl was currently hiding herself extremely carefully as well.

However, the reason she was so hidden wasn't because of the patrolling police, but because she was on guard for an even tougher opponent.

Dairenji Suzuka wasn't the only one who knew what was frightening about 'him'. To her, who always put in great forethought, it was already quite dangerous to have approached this place without proper preparations.

But this time, she had to witness the developments even if it posed a risk.

"......There's no helping it, I'll have to act."

Though it's very troublesome - the girl murmured quietly as if saying it to herself. Contrasting with her doll-like expressionless appearance, her words had genuine resolve.

But the question was how to act. The girl feared that there was almost no time remaining and that her strength was insufficient. There wasn't much she could do.

"....."

The girl thought deeply and seriously, briskly striding away from the area.

It had just reached ten at night.

There wasn't much time left to wait, but the dawn was endlessly distant.

Chapter 2 - In the night

Part 1

It was said to be an ancient 'family tradition'.

As a branch family member, she would become the shikigami of a main family member.

"So you're my shikigami!"

He didn't know whether she understood the meaning of 'shikigami', but the main family son proclaimed this with an unreliable appearance. But he didn't understand the meaning of 'shikigami' either. Hence, after she asked about its meaning, his expression immediately soured and he felt a big headache.

"Uh..... whatever. Anyway, you're coming to my home. You just need to listen to what I say. In return, I'll protect you."

He had truly kept that promise. He would always protect her if someone scorned her. If she were bullied, he would definitely come running to help. It was the master's responsibility to protect the shikigami. He had said that, consoling her crying self and always staying with her. He was always by her side.

She was very happy.

It was her first time knowing this kind of happiness.

She also wanted to do something for him. She wanted to help him. She felt this from the bottom of her heart.

Then, those feelings ended up becoming an unshakeable loyalty. New light came to her 'life' through her self-dedication.

"No way!?"

Tsuchimikado Chizuru was furious, as if electricity were flowing through her body.

But her fury was basically filled with despair, pain, and deep regret.

"Natsume-chan died? Don't be ridiculous! Such - Such a thing!?"

Chizuru grabbed the collar of the main family head Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi and mercilessly yanked up. Yasuzumi didn't display any resistance either, willingly enduring Chizuru's anger.

Tsuchimikado Takahiro put his hands on Chizuru's shoulders from behind her, getting his wife to calm down. Suddenly, strength receded from Chizuru's hands that grabbed Yasuzumi. Chizuru let Yasuzumi go, burying her face in her husband's chest and starting to cry.

".....I knew it."

She sobbed.

"I knew we shouldn't have given away the Raven's Wing. We shouldn't have given it away, no matter what happened to us.....!"

Chizuru's sobbing resounded through his chest, and Takahiro stroked his wife's shoulders with a solemn face.

"Are you certain?"

He confirmed this of Yasuzumi and Yasuzumi nodded bitterly.

"Her star has vanished, but--"

Yasuzumi still wanted to say something, negating himself with a 'but'.

"At least I can't see it. I can only think of what has happened..... But, no. Natsume's life has indeed ended. I fear that is doubtless."

He sounded poignant from the remorse wracking his body. As the master of his shikigami identity and his old friend from childhood, his pain was also deeply conveyed to Takahiro. But Takahiro understood and watched that pain and remorse.

Of course, Yasuzumi wasn't the only one feeling anguished. Chizuru and Takahiro were the same. He didn't have the right to pretend to be feeling sad like this in the first place.

Maybe Yasuzumi planned on taking responsibility for all of the sin alone, but such a thing wouldn't be allowed. After all, this was a sin that the three of them ought to bear together.

".....I know about Natsume. But what about Harutora? How's that kid right now?"

The crying Chizuru came back to her senses as if waking from a dream after her husband brought this up. "I don't know." Yasuzumi said with no reservations.

"A strength whose stars I cannot read has been added to the Onmyou Agency. I fear it is the Yase Doji. It looks like the Souma have also come out of their long time of hiding. We... were a step late."

Yasuzumi was an excellent 'diviner'. However, the strength of 'divining' wasn't an omnipotent prediction ability that allowed him to clearly see the future. Rather, if he erred in the process, there was the possibility that he would obtain an inaccurate impression of the future. It was a double-edged sword. Ultimately, it had been he who decided how to advance in that moment. He could only continue moving forward.

"Anyway, to Tokyo. Make your preparations, the two of you."

Yasuzumi instructed them this, and Takahiro nodded. They had escaped the eyes and ears of the Onmyou Agency and hidden in a city outside Tokyo. After all, the incident of the attack on the main family residence had happened the night before. He hadn't been able to anticipate things moving this far. Even if they departed for Tokyo now, it was uncertain whether they would be able to arrive before dawn.

Perhaps realizing Takahiro's worries, Yasuzumi spoke sternly.

"All we can do now is trust in Harutora's guard."

Part 2

The Exorcist Bureau main branch was a bit far from the location of the Onmyou Agency.

Though The Exorcist Bureau was a department inside the Onmyou Agency, it was a large-scale organization that comprised over half of the entire Onmyou Agency. Moreover, because its duties were highly mobile due to equipment like transporters and portable altars, it was utterly different from other departments. Hence, in addition to the Shinjuku and Meguro branches, the headquarters building was constructed to rival the Onmyou Agency headquarters.

A sedan drove to the Exorcist Bureau headquarters.

The driver prepared to make a U-turn, but a small, kimono-wearing old lady impatiently got off from the backseat. The Onmyou Academy principal Kurahashi Miyo.

The principal hurried to the headquarters without closing the car door either. As if they had already been contacted, the waiting bureau members greeted her and quickly led the way in.

They went - surprisingly - to a lounge. It was a room for relaxation used during breaks. According to what the bureau members leading the way said, the 'interrogation' had already ended and they were on standby here. As expected, when the principal entered the lounge, she noticed the figure of her granddaughter sitting on a chair with her head bowed in a corner of the vast space.

"Grandma.....!"

Kyouko noticed her grandmother and stood up. Painful sadness still lingered on her expression that was swollen from crying. Just seeing this made her feel heartbreaking pain. The boy who sat in the seat next to her also stood up along with

Kyouko. It was Kyouko's classmate, Tenma. His expression was also tinted with despair.

Only a single female bureau member was in the vast lounge, perhaps because it was already late or maybe because they had left after learning about the situation. She seemed to be keeping them company. It was probably out of simple concern for the two underaged children. After the principal approached, she rose politely and left to let the principal take her place.

"......Kyouko-kun, Tenma-kun."

She had already heard of the situation. Shame, regret, anger, and sadness poured forth. But right now she softly greeted them and refrained from expressing her emotions.

Kyouko burst into tears, lowering her head towards her grandmother's chest.

"Natsume-chan..... N-Natsume-chan, she....."

Her voice was cacophonic as she cried in gasps. Right, it was 'Natsume-chan'. Recalling it now, it had been after she learned of Natsume's true identity from the Meguro incident that her granddaughter had become unhappy recently. She had heard that she had finally regained her happy appearance today. In other words, it was proof that their relationship had overcome the difficulty. The unfamiliar name of 'Natsume-chan' was proof of that fact.

However, things had become like this after that.

Kyouko continued sobbing. The principal softly stroked her granddaughter's shoulder, turning her face to the other student.

"Sorry, Tenma-kun. I came late."

"......No. .....That sort of thing....."

"I already heard some of the situation before coming here. But what about Touji-kun and Suzuka-kun - and Harutora-kun? Were they not with you?"

"Yes..... The three of them are still being interrogated....."

Tenma probably didn't have a clear idea of the situation either. After all, he had also been in interrogation until recently.

In any case, it had been an urgent, abrupt, and deadly incident. It was hard to believe, even though she saw that things had changed this much. It seemed like her 'divination' ability had completely atrophied. If she had been aware earlier, then this outcome might not have come to pass.

No, right now wasn't the time to criticize herself. She had to extend a helping hand to the students left before blaming herself.

Right afterwards--

"...So you've finished here too."

A twenty-five-or-so year old man said this, appearing in the lounge.

He had a wild style, wearing a Hawaiian shirt and battered jeans. But his expression was uncharacteristically solemn and a penetrating sharpness lay under his unusually fierce expression. The valor of the strong aura carried by his whole body was even more noticeable in this tragic scene.

National First-Class Onmyouji Kogure Zenjirou. He was an Independent Exorcist belonging to the Exorcist Bureau and had met Kyouko and the others.

Then, he entered the lounge leading Touji and Suzuka.

Tenma heaved a sigh of relief after looking at the two of them. Kyouko finally stopped crying and raised her head.

But in contrast, the expressions of the two hadn't cleared up yet. Touji looked malevolent and distraught, he glared ahead. Suzuka's face was so pale that it seemed like she would faint soon. The two seemed like flimsy straws, giving off a kind of dangerously weak impression.

The principal looked at the two and nodded as if confirming that they were safe and sound for now.

"Zenjirou-san....."

"Principal Kurahashi, it's an honor."

Kogure respectfully bowed to the speaking principal. He was also a graduate of the Onmyou Academy. Even after graduating and becoming an independent exorcist, he still held the principal in deep regard.

"Could you tell me about the details?"

"Yes. .....Although, I actually just got here from the Shinjuku branch just now....."

After Kogure replied this, he looked over his shoulder at Touji and Suzuka who had followed behind him.

"Though they were still in interrogation when I arrived, it was after the two of them had already finished talking about the general situation. They were silent no matter what was asked afterwards, and so I'm responsible for them for now."

"I see, it must be troublesome for you....."

"It's nothing. After all, this situation is....."

Kogure also inadvertently spoke vaguely. He had been Natsume's bodyguard once during the 'Hinamatsuri Repurification' three months ago. He was quite pained since he had met her himself.

Moreover, it seemed like he had other worries.

"Come to think of it..... Principal, where's Jin? Does he already know about this....."

".....I'm not sure. I haven't been able to contact him since we parted in the evening."

Natsume's homeroom teacher Ohtomo Jin had entered the Onmyou Academy with Kogure and had been his coworker in the Onmyou Agency.

Moreover, the principal was also worried about Ohtomo. What would he think after he learned about the business with Natsume? Just imagining made her scared.

On the other hand, "I see....." After Kogure murmured, he immediately recomposed himself.

Even if there were no outsiders in the lounge, he lowered his voice out of care for the surroundings and said:

".....Principal, you already know about the Raven's Wing, right?"

Kyouko's body shuddered. "Ah." The principal quietly replied to match Kogure.

"I heard that the Raven's Wing possessed Harutora-kun and went out of control."

"That's roughly what I heard. Then, what about the person who brought the Raven's Wing?"

"Well....."

He hadn't exactly gotten ahold of such detailed information. Kogure turned his gaze to Tenma in response to the principal's request for an answer.

The information Kogure had obtained was all testimony from the students who had been there. Hence, he judged that it would be better for them to explain it themselves. Though Tenma was momentarily tense, he spoke up with a solemn face when the principal said "Tenma-kun" to him.

"......A girl called Souma Takiko. Yesterday she came to the Onmyou Academy to observe our studies."

She couldn't help but bite her lip when she heard that name. It was the name Ohtomo had mentioned today, just hours ago.

But the Raven's Wing had earlier been moved to the Tsuchimikado home, to Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi. The fire at the residence had been during the dead of night yesterday. Since then, information about Yasuzumi had cut off and the Raven's Wing's whereabouts had become unknown.

Then why had it fallen into Takiko's hands?

Just then--

"I-It was me!"

Suddenly, Kyouko burst into a wail.

"I, I told that girl about the fireworks......!"

She confessed in a whimpering tone.

It was her first time seeing her granddaughter so immersed in grief. The principal had been away from the academy building when Takiko had come to observe the Onmyou Academy studies yesterday. She had heard that Takiko and Natsume conducted a mock battle, but something had probably happened between her and Kyouko as well.

The sound of Kyouko's sobs echoed emptily in the vast lounge.

However--

"......So what if you say that."

Touji spat brusquely. Kogure, Tenma, and Suzuka turned their heads in surprise.

"Natsume died because you told her about our meeting today? What a joke, don't be ridiculous!"

He said painfully and in abandon. Though his methods were crude, he was essentially declaring that he didn't believe that it was Kyouko's mistake. Touji asserted this not as sympathy or consolation, but rather as a pure fact.

"But..... but....."

"Kyouko. Natsume died because of the magic from the Raven's Wing possessing Harutora's body. Natsume gave up her own life to suppress Harutora's rampage."

As if she hadn't heard about this, Kyouko and Tenma all inadvertently stopped breathing.

"You could actually say that idiot Harutora was the one who killed Natsume. Do you think so?"

"....."

Kyouko silently shook her head. "Same as me." Touji said.

"Therefore, Natsume's death wasn't Harutora's mistake or your mistake either. Rather, all of us who were there should feel guilty. No single one of us should bear it all."

Touji communicated the true thoughts he wanted to say through a series of blunt words. Those words only supported the nearly-breaking-down Kyouko because of their undisguised sincerity.

Kyouko's breathing was still rough and she still sniffled, but she stopped crying. The principal thanked Touji in her heart. While she was proud of her student, she also felt regret at allowing that outcome that made Touji say this.

".....As for this incident--"

Adopting a businesslike tone, Kogure calmly changed the topic.

"The Exorcist Bureau's official opinion says that Natsume-kun was killed after encountering a spiritual disaster. More accurately, though the Raven's Wing was designated as a prohibited magic tool, its actual form was closer to a shikigami - a materialized spiritual entity - than a magical tool. As a result of it losing control, it was viewed as a type of spiritual disaster. Harutora-kun was also 'possessed' by this spiritual disaster and lost control - Touji-kun and Dairenji tried to stop him. That's the gist of it."

The students' expressions seemed to stiffen by the way he indifferently made the 'post-incident report'. But it was because it wasn't mixed with unnecessary emotions and because of its emotionless tone that his felt rational rather than emotional and made the listeners regain their calm.

As an exorcist, Kogure might have faced such scenes in person several times before. His words felt stern, like those of a veteran with much experience. He was different than the person the principal knew from his Onmyou Academy time.

She straightened herself and organized her feelings.

"......Zenjirou-san. Is Harutora-kun's interrogation still going on?'

"Yes. But it's not at headquarters."

"What happened?"

"Albeit what Touji just said..... circumstances are circumstances. His interrogation is currently being conducted at the Mystical Investigator Department instead of the Exorcist Bureau because of the Agency - the Onmyou Agency's instructions."

The first to react to Kogure's explanation were Touji and Suzuka. The two instantly glanced at each other, their demeanors changing as their expressions became solemn. Touji clicked his tongue as well.

"What's wrong?" Kogure turned his head, but the two didn't meet his gaze.

"Anyway." A surprised expression suddenly emerged on Kogure's face, but he continued speaking.

"When I arrived it was already after he had been handed over. And in this situation, who knows how long the interrogation will continue for....."

"I see, he's at the Mystical Investigator Department....."

Unlike the younger two, the principal carefully masked her inner feelings.

Because of her talk with Ohtomo during the day, she happened to hold suspicions about the Onmyou Agency. She didn't plan on suspecting Kogure himself, but he might not know everything about the organization. She couldn't carelessly give Harutora - especially the Harutora who had been chosen by the Raven's Wing - to the current Onmyou Agency.

The principal calmly moved her gaze to Touji.

"Touji-kun, what you felt from being nearby is enough. How was 'Harutora-kun'?"

Kogure slightly furrowed his brows. It wasn't just Kogure, as the questioned Touji also seemed to comprehend the intent of the principal's question.

"Of course, he was 'Harutora'. Though he became emotional..... and said some nonsense."

"What?"

".....It's nothing."

For some reason, Touji spoke vaguely. But for now, it seemed that Harutora hadn't yet 'awakened'.

Even so, things might not be good. In any case, no one currently knew what exactly was going on with 'Yakou's reincarnation'.

"...Kogure-san, I'm going to the Onmyou Agency building after this. Could you let me meet with Harutora?"

In any case, Harutora was still underage. Moreover, his parents were unreachable just like Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi. Then her Onmyou Academy Principal self might be able to get Harutora back as a proxy guardian of her student.

It went without saying that the most reliable method was to request this of her Onmyou Agency VIP son, Kurahashi Genji.

However, the principal was currently holding certain suspicions of her own son. The information that Souma Takiko had obtained the Raven's Wing strengthened those suspicions even more.

The Pacific War in the past. The Kurahashi family, the most powerful clan of the branch families, and the Souma family that had considerable influence in the Imperial Army were the two forces that had assisted the young genius Tsuchimikado Yakou.

And currently, she couldn't ignore the possibility that these two forces were joining together again in the darkness to encircle Yakou's reincarnation. In these circumstances, it was very unlikely that her son was unrelated as the current Kurahashi family head and the Onmyou Agency chief. Rather, it was almost zero. As long as this doubt didn't vanish, she had to move carefully around her son.

Of course, though she had relinquished her position of overseeing the family, she had been the Kurahashi family head before. Moreover, she had been the 'Kurahashi

family diviner' widely reputed in the influential community not limited to just the Onmyou Agency. She would use the connections she had established from before. No matter how things turned out, she had to first get Harutora back.

"Understood."

Kogure nodded to the principal's request.

"Harutora-kun probably felt quite a great shock. It would be good for him to have Principal Kurahashi with him. I agree."

Though she didn't know if he was aware of the suspicions that the principal held, at least the words he had just said were his true feelings. Although it wasn’t within his jurisdiction, she would be able to move freely even inside the Onmyou Agency if she had a National First-Class Onmyouji like Kogure backing her.

But the principal's considerations were simplified.

"...Ah, you're here."

A man walked into the lounge, greeting them like that.

A small middle-aged man. A beard grew around his mouth and chin and gave him an overall sophisticated atmosphere. He had an indescribable appearance made up of a combination of somberness and affability.

"Miyachi-san?"

Kogure turned his head in surprise.

"What now, at this time?"

"What do you mean 'what now', I'm practically staying here overnight because that idiot Kagami got locked up."

The man shrugged his shoulders in annoyance.

The director of the Exorcist Bureau Purification Command Room, Miyachi Iwao. Though it couldn't be seen from his lighthearted actions, he was currently the highest ranked exorcists. The Independent Exorcist Kogure was his direct subordinate.

Miyachi approached them and said "It's been a while, Principal Kurahashi", lowering his head respectfully.

In addition, he also quickly gave Suzuka a knowing gaze. Miyachi and Suzuka knew each other, as they were both Divine Generals.

"It's also been a while since I've seen you, miss. This time really is a disaster."

"....."

She couldn't keep his deep, composed voice from creeping into her pained, complicated emotions. Suzuka looked away without saying anything at all, but Miyachi seemed to regard the girl, worriedly staring at Suzuka.

"You came at the right time, Director Miyachi. I just heard from Independent Officer Kogure that an Onmyou Academy student was being interrogated by the Mystical Investigators. He's still underage, so I hope that I could stay with him - or at least meet him. Would I be able to speak to him through Director Miyachi?"

Though Miyachi was in the Exorcist bureau, he could be called the pillar of the Onmyou Agency, as he was the highest-ranking member in the spiritual disaster purification job. If he and Kogure were intermediaries, future negotiations would become favorable.

However--

"I'm extremely sorry, Principal Kurahashi. I can't allow you to meet with Tsuchimikado Harutora."

Though his expression was extremely complex, Miyachi spoke resolutely.

The principal inadvertently went speechless. Kogure was also taken aback, interjecting "Miyachi-san?" from the side.

"Why? Judging by the circumstances, the principal's request is extremely reasonable. The Mystical Investigators probably wouldn't have any problems if you negotiated with them directly."

"The Mystical Investigators asked something of me earlier. They would leave the other students to the Exorcist Bureau, but the Mystical Investigators would be responsible for Tsuchimikado Harutora. .....Also, Principal Kurahashi. I hope that you'd be able to focus on your Onmyou Academy work for now. This is a kind of..... unofficial advice."

"Advice?"

"Yeah."

Miyachi announced with a calm, penetrating look to the intensely shaken principal.

"That's the opinion of the Mystical Investigators. Incidents involving the Onmyou Academy have been frequent lately. There was 'D' last month - Ashiya Doman's attack on the Onmyou Academy building, the dispute in the borrowed Meguro branch, and then this incident. Also, these incidents were all involved with 'specific students'."

"That....."

"I probably don't need to state the reasons now. The problem is the effectiveness of 'his' supervision is being called into question. The Mystical Investigators - no, the Onmyou Agency higher-ups decided that regarding the question of 'his' treatment, the Onmyou Academy's 'allotment' and management ability have already been exceeded. I believe that this is an 'extremely reasonable' decision from an objective standpoint."

"No way!" Kyouko protested Miyachi's - the Onmyou Agency's - viewpoint.

Touji also clicked his tongue and said:

".....Isn't the Meguro incident more the fault of the Exorcist Bureau than the Onmyou Academy?"

"Uh, so you're Ato Touji-kun. It's completely as you say."

The Exorcist Bureau higher-up admitted readily, and Touji couldn't help but lose his momentum.

"Incidentally, Touji-kun. The Mystical Investigators admitted their faults in their own way. They said something like 'some decisions may have been inappropriate'."

"Then--!"

"However, the decision has been made that he can no longer be entrusted solely to the Onmyou Academy on the basis of being underage. That's what the past has taught us."

Miyachi replied simply to Touji's challenge with an unwavering expression. Then, even Tenma who had been silent throughout continued Touji's rebuttal of Miyachi.

"A-According to what Kogure-san said, Harutora just lost control due to the effect of a spiritual disaster, so what is he asking about? Is the investigation going on right now to clear up the details of the situation? But what you said just now sounded like Harutora-kun would be kept in the Onmyou Agency from now on--"

".....It won't be 'forever', but that's how it will be 'for now'."

Miyachi replied honestly to Tenma's question, his face apologetic.

"Sorry. Although it must be extremely hard on you..... This has already been 'decided'."

"No way....."

Stunned, Tenma was unable to say anything more. The principal looked sharply at Kogure, but Kogure was also lightly shaking his head with a stiff expression.

It seemed that Kogure hadn't thought that the situation would be this severe either. Moreover, since it seemed that Miyachi was acting on behalf of the Mystical Investigators, Kogure could do almost nothing.

"Principal Kurahashi."

Miyachi continued speaking, as if reminding her.

"This is my personal opinion, Principal Kurahashi - you have been disturbed by 'him' and the multiple incidents related to 'him', and have lost sight of your concern for the other students. Maybe 'he' is indeed an important student, but the other students are also the same, right?"

"Of course, I--"

"Then you shouldn't be putting priority on 'his' outcome and ignoring the harm that other students received, right? Pardon me for being so direct, but you're too focused on 'him' - no, I should say 'them'. More students might lose future possibilities because you're too hung up on Tsuchimikado Harutora and Tsuchimikado Natsume. What do you think about this?"

Actually, an unprecedented number of students had withdrawn from the Onmyou Academy in the past two months. That was clearly an effect from Doman's attack and the Meguro branch incident.

There was nothing wrong with people who couldn't endure leaving the academy - saying something like that was overly cruel to the underage students, given the commotions that had happened multiple times. There were people among the

students who grew rapidly from experiencing actual battle, and there were also students who grew by training bit by bit every day and showing their true worth in the end. The qualifications of the latter were definitely no inferior to those of the former. Also, just like Miyachi pointed out, she couldn't say the Onmyou Academy was currently doing its job right now with regard to the nurturing of the latter.

"Strictly speaking, it's currently uncertain whether Tsuchimikado Harutora is Yakou's reincarnation."

The group couldn't help but freeze up because of Miyachi's words that cut straight to the core.

"But the possibility is already enough to become a source of dispute. Moreover..... there have already been deaths. I'm extremely sorry, but please understand that in the future, this will be in the category of 'law enforcement' rather than 'education'."

Miyachi's voice wasn't stern, and his expression wasn't malicious.

But even so, his words had a weight that couldn't be ignored.

A steely silence completely crushed all of their rebuttals. The principal struggled desperately to think, but couldn't think of any reason for further protest. Though she felt useless. She could only withdraw from here for now. She would have to resiliently continue negotiating.

Not with Miyachi. With the Onmyou Agency. In other words, with the leader of the Onmyou Agency, her own son.

...Just as principal backed off wordlessly.

"......Natsume-chan."

Kyouko spoke up.

Her eyes, wet with tears, stared intently at Miyachi's face and she pleaded with a tone without the slightest hint of malice.

"Can I see Natsume-chan?"

Miyachi's expression twisted from suffering again.

Miyachi forced himself to keep calm, apologizing "......Sorry." Shame and suffering surpassing what he had felt before overflowed from his voice.

"The possibility that someone who died after being involved in a spiritual disaster becoming the core of a subsequent spiritual disaster is very high. Hence, the Exorcist Bureau will manage her for a period of time, as obligated to by Onmyou Law. So I hope that you can wait one night. You will be able to see her tomorrow, and I'll take responsibility for helping you arrange that."

Miyachi promised with his most sincere attitude, even thought it was just to a student like Kyouko. Kyouko, Touji, Tenma, and Suzuka didn't say anything more after this.

Even Miyachi wouldn't hold malice or animosity towards students. In addition, he had never even seemed annoyed or the slightest bit contemptuous. They couldn't keep being selfish.

But.

"......Director Miyachi. There's a former exorcist among the students' teachers, and he should understand the Exorcist Bureau's rules. Would it be possible to let him go see Natsume-kun in place of these kids?"

Their smallest request.

Though Miyachi hesitated for a moment, he finally agreed to the principal's request.

".....I understand. No, I just arrived..... Yes. Yes, no problem. I'll report again afterwards."

Fujiwara sighed heavily, hanging up on the call from Principal Kurahashi.

A painful job. Though he had experienced the deaths of subordinates when he had been an exorcist, he hadn't thought that he would be entrusted with the same mission after becoming more professional and becoming a teacher.

Fujiwara had heard about Tsuchimikado Natsume's business - the rumors tying her to Tsuchimikado Yakou - so he helped Harutora and the others with their individual training whenever he had time. Because of this, he had been quite shaken when the principal contacted him. To be honest, he still felt it hard to believe even when he was going to check Natsume's remains. He felt as if he had experienced a nightmare.

The familiar Exorcist Bureau headquarters. He seemed to have been introduced already, as Fujiwara was quickly escorted in after stating his identity.

Spiritual disasters happened from day to night - but more accurately, most were from sunset to sunrise. Hence, there weren't many bureau members in the headquarters, unlike during the day. It was a nostalgic atmosphere to Fujiwara, but it only felt empty to him right now.

Anyway, he hadn't forgotten how to respond during this kind of time. Clear his emotions and eliminate unnecessary thoughts. Fujiwara advanced indifferently, finding his way on his own.

His destination was in the depths of the headquarters. At the dark end of the corridor was a room with a metal sign hung coldly stating 'Spirit Calming Room'. Fujiwara stood in front of it and opened the door after preparing himself.

A small corridor extended on the other side of the door, with doors that had been sealed magically at the end. The Spirit Calming Room in the depths was surrounded by a barrier that stabilized spiritual aspects. Moreover, there was a small reception area to the front and side after the corridor. Here was where he obtained permission to release the seal on the doors and enter the inner structure.

However, there was no one here.

Fujiwara furrowed his brows. "...Is someone here?" He asked while looking around the reception area. Then, he noticed that an overweight bureau member was fainted on the floor inside the reception area.

Fujiwara's expression changed and he 'looked' at the seal again. It had already been released. Someone had entered inside without permission.

He checked his charms at hand. Though he had considered first contacting bureau members, the one placed in the Spirit Calming Room right now was none other than an Onmyou Academy student.

"....."

Fujiwara refined his aura, letting magical energy circulate through his body. His expression tensed and he sneakily pushed open the doors whose seal had been released.

The interior was very vast. It was an inorganic, cold, drab room. A bed was placed by the innermost wall, and only it was illuminated with light. In front of the bed stood a figure bathed in white light.

Once he saw the figure standing with his back to him, relief and consternation assaulted Fujiwara simultaneously.

".....Ohtomo-kun?"

The figure's right leg was a prosthetic, and one of his hands rested on a cane. His fellow teacher, Ohtomo Jin. He was Tsuchimikado Natsume's homeroom teacher. He wouldn't mistake his characteristic figure for anyone else.

Even so, Fujiwara felt like it was a different person from the Ohtomo he knew when he saw his back.

"......Fujiwara-sensei, my apologies, did I scare you?"

It really was Ohtomo.

Overall, his expression was composed without any grief. However, Fujiwara's heart rate quickened.

Ohtomo had white hair. It wasn't because of the light, it was an after-effect of his magical battle during the Onmyou Academy attack incident. Fujiwara had already seen it once when he went to visit him in the hospital. The incongruity he felt didn't stem from this fine change. But he would have trouble responding if he were asked what it was. In any case, just looking made him unable to calm down.

Suddenly, he recalled an impression similar to what he felt now.

It was then, when he had blocked the way of Ashiya Doman who had attacked the Onmyou Academy alone. His feeling inexplicably reminded him of that experience.

"......O-Ohtomo-kun, how did you get in here....."

"Ahh, the seal? Sorry, I couldn't stop myself no matter what..... I took a few liberties. Don't worry, the barrier won't be damaged, and the worker outside will wake up soon too."

"Wait, I meant....."

"It's really embarrassing that everything had already ended by the time I got ahold of the information..... What happened, for there to be a death."

"O-Ohtomo-kun!"

A faint, bitter smile emerged on Ohtomo's face in front of the speechless Fujiwara.

Then, he turned towards the bed again.

On the bed lay a student - the remains of a student. A girl with black hair. A 'she', not a 'he'. Fujiwara had only learned of that fact just recently too. Her eyes were closed, and she looked to be sleeping at first glance. A tranquil corpse.

Ohtomo leaned his body slightly, facing Natsume. "......Sorry." He spoke softly.

"Sorry, Natsume-kun. I'm really..... sorry."

Fujiwara couldn't see Ohtomo's current expression from behind. But the unease he felt at the start increased. It was almost no different from 'terror'.

"Ohtomo-kun. In any case, come with me for now, we'll call the principal over and talk."

"......Thank you very much, Fujiwara-sensei."

Ohtomo returned to his former posture and replied to the desperately appealing Fujiwara.

"But, it's alright. I just sent my resignation in to the principal."

He spoke, still with his back to him.

This couldn't go on. Fujiwara instinctively reacted and loudly said "Wait!" while stepping forward to try to forcefully grab him. At the same time, Ohtomo knocked the ground with his cane, still with his back to him.

Then--

"...Eh?"

In just a moment, his consciousness went blank. No, perhaps it wasn't a moment. A blankness of several seconds, or maybe several minutes.

Ohtomo's figure vanished like smoke.

Ohtomo walked alone through the corridors on his fake leg and cane. None of the surrounding bureau members noticed him. They passed in front of him without noticing him, changed their direction, or stopped, all making room for him to pass. Among them was a group of exorcists who wore miasma protection clothing, but when they were about to block Ohtomo's path, they unconsciously rapidly moved to the sides of the corridor, avoiding Ohtomo as he passed. As a result, Ohtomo didn't stop a single time, and he didn't even change his pace as he quietly left the Exorcist Bureau headquarters alone.

After leaving the headquarters, the warm summer night air covered his skin.

Ohtomo reached his hand into the pocket of his suit, taking out his phone. He walked while recalling a certain number and dialing it in.

That was the number that had been given personally to him by its owner yesterday at dawn.

The phone call made it through on the third ring.

"Priest?"

Ohtomo calmly opened his mouth with the same tone as always.

"The situation's changed a bit. Though I'm ashamed that it's only been a day, could you repay that favor immediately?"

Part 3

The Onmyou Agency headquarters was an old yet vast building, and moreover, since it was where most of the nation's magic-related management were gathered, there was various equipment both inside and outside the building.

One of them was in a storage room being used as a warehouse. But it wasn't any simple warehouse.

A sealed storage room.

Highly dangerous magical objects. Objects that were 'cursed' or were spiritually abnormal. A room that sealed magical tools designated forbidden and objects that were considered very dangerous if left alone were sealed here by a tough barrier. Most things were under the jurisdiction of the Research and Development Department, but there were also things directly overseen by the Chief sealed inside here.

The sealed storage room was in the depths of the Research and Development Department's Research Lab One.

The Raven's Wing, which had been retrieved by the spiritual disaster purification team, had been moved into this Research Lab One.

A barrier had been put up on a two-meter wide square table. In the center was placed an ancient brass birdcage, and inside it was a single raven. Upon careful observation, one would notice that it had three legs.

The symbol of the sun in Onmyoudou, the yatagarasu.

This yatagarasu was Yakou's magical tool, the transformed state of the shikigami known as the Raven's Wing.

The Raven's Wing, choosing its yatagarasu form, had its eyes closed as if sleeping and was motionless. Yashamaru looked at the yatagarasu's appearance with interest.

He circled around and sat on the chair near the table. Humor and a blade-like sharpness emerged in his eyes, one behind a monocle.

While Yashamaru stared at the Raven's Wing, the door behind him was unlocked and a man walked into the research lab.

He was not young. Rather, it seemed that his flesh were steeped in 'age'.

However, on the other hand, he had an overwhelming power as if that age directly became strength. His extremely serious personality could be understood at a glance of his outer appearance.

The Onmyou Agency Chief. The VIP of the magical world who was currently the Exorcist Bureau Chief and the Mystical Investigator Chief, Kurahashi Genji.

Kurahashi stood behind Yashamaru, glancing into the depths of the sealed storage room.

"......You still haven't prepared a seal?"

"Of course. It just started after all."

Yashamaru replied informally to the Onmyou Agency Chief's question without even turning around. Yashamaru's past self, Dairenji Shidou, had been Kurahashi's coworker in the Onmyou Agency. After Dairenji's death and resurrection, their relationship had already lasted ten years.

"You've heard already, right? Tsuchimikado Harutora still hasn't awakened completely as Yakou. Of course, I'm not sure if this Raven's Wing is the key to the reincarnation..... But it's worth investigating and trying out."

Yashamaru spoke indifferently, putting his white-gloved fingers under his chin.

"Moreover, I was very curious about 'that man' in my previous life. I personally believed the secret art of resurrection was one of Yakou's most powerful secrets."

"....."

Kurahashi listened to Yashamaru's words while watching his face from behind. Yashamaru almost paid no attention to Kurahashi, continuously staring at the yatagarasu in the birdcage with narrowed eyes. Kurahashi could read the meaning of his expression due to having known him for a long time.

A voracious thirst for knowledge and a childish curiosity.

He seemed somewhat excited in front of the Raven's Wing he had dreamed of for so long. A wry smile that seemed a tiny bit different from usual flashed over Kurahashi's mouth.

".....That's not it. That Raven's Wing probably becomes - no, it 'might' become the existence that proves your personal hypothesis. The one about the Final Phase."

"Hoho, I've been found out."

Yashamaru admitted it readily. Creak. He turned his head to Kurahashi behind him as if leaning against the chair.

"Since I was born as an Onmyouji of this nation, isn't it necessary to want to meet the yaoyorozu no kami? I have to know who they are and 'how they exist' for this. Right?"

".....So? That Raven's Wing is the 'Phase Five shikigami' you speak of?"

"That....."

Yashamaru spoke vaguely and then his chair made noise as he lost his calm. This time, he leaned his body forward.

He put his elbows on his knees, saying:

"Honestly, that hypothesis is still mystery. This Raven's Wing is a shikigami and also a magical tool. Though this thing is entirely a servant shikigami, it's technically a manmade shikigami, you know? It was created solely as a 'magical tool' by Yakou's hands. Hence, although its form resembles the yatagarasu of legend, it's just the form that Yakou made it into."

"Is that so?"

"I'd say I am eighty or ninety percent confident. Even so, it becomes hard to deal with when you consider 'why did Yakou choose this form'..... Of course, you could also believe it was purely Yakou's fancy, but we also have to search for the origins of the magical energy that forms the core of this thing....."

Yashamaru inadvertently forgot about his explanation to Kurahashi, turning his eyes to the yatagarasu and muttering to himself. This was also familiar to Kurahashi, who had known him in his previous identity.

"Alright."

Kurahashi called Yashamaru back from his research.

"Let's put aside the Raven's Wing's true identity for now. I first want to organize the situation."

Yashamaru's expression seemed like that of a child who had been ordered to stop playing his video game, but he immediately rose while turning from his chair with a "Fine."

"The princess?"

"She returned to the hotel with Kumomaru."

"How is she?"

"Tsuchimikado Natsume's death seemed to be quite a large shock, and I heard she was distraught afterwards."

"What about now?"

"We kind of forced her to sleep. Though intense mood swings are the norm for shamans, the princess's power is a bit strong. It would be very troublesome if she called down a god. I might have accidentally gotten carried away in the past, so I'll have to be careful in the future."

Yashamaru replied to Kurahashi with an expression that didn't seem regretful at all. In comparison, Kurahashi's expression was unfazed as always.

Just a few words.

"......An unnecessary sacrifice."

His expression was still unchanged, but his voice was bitter.

Yashamaru shrugged.

"I think it's a bit dumb to unilaterally decide whether a sacrifice was necessary or unnecessary. The dead are the same, no matter what cause they died for."

Kurahashi glanced at Yashamaru's expression but didn't open his mouth again. He hadn't planned on speaking about their views of death in the first place.

"Yakou's reincarnation is the branch family's - the branch family's 'apparent' son, Tsuchimikado Harutora. That's not wrong."

"Indeed, you can believe that. Actually, I met him directly just now."

"What?"

Kurahashi narrowed his eyes and Yashamaru grinned. "Don't worry." He supplemented it with an explanation of the incident.

After hearing that, Kurahashi lowered his head to look at Yashamaru with a bitter face.

".....It's hard to say you've established a friendly relationship. Don't you think you were hasty?"

"I wanted to check the state of his awakening. Is the so-called reincarnation purely about the soul? Or does he inherit his abilities and memories from his previous life? If he inherits that, then to what degree? Depending on those, we may completely change how we deal with him later on. Right?"

"My position relative to Tsuchimikado Yakou won't change regardless of the nature of his reincarnation. That's different from you."

"Even so, the 'priorities' would probably change. After all, there are a lot of things to do."

"Even so, you were a little too provocative, just judging by what you said just now."

"Really? The main point is that it's fine if we just put a few fetters on him. It'll be a pain if we let him run in the opposite direction. If we do that much and sprinkle around a little bait, he won't freely run out of our hand even if we're not keeping watch over him, right? Well, it was a very bad impression, but that's not hard to change. The opponent's just a child, no matter what anyone says."

Yashamaru opened his hands exaggeratedly while asserting this with quite the frivolous tone.

Kurahashi scorned:

"Though he's a child, he's Yakou's reincarnation."

"Hey hey, Kurahashi, you haven't forgotten, right? Even Yakou was just a young man who died early."

Yashamaru spoke calmly and impertinently. But it was hard for his former colleague Kurahashi to view his words as rude.

The years that Tsuchimikado Yakou had lived, and the years Tsuchimikado Harutora had lived. Even if the two were added together, they didn't reach the years that Kurahashi or Yashamaru - Dairenji - had lived.

Moreover, needless to say, the two of them hadn't wasted a single day of those years.

"Incidentally, I also came in contact with that Ato Touji along with him. Suzuka was there too. I didn't seem to see your daughter."

"Good. I hope that she's far away from these things if possible."

"What about your mother?"

"Preparations have been made in that regard."

"Good."

Yashamaru grinned, mimicking Kurahashi's tone.

Maybe it was quite comical on some level for the Onmyou Agency Chief and his former VIP colleague to be so concerned about students. But they could only establish the right 'circumstances' by staying in control of 'everything'.

Ato Touji and Dairenji Suzuka, along with Kurahashi Kyouko and the others, were people that they cared about for certain purposes even if they didn't have power. For now, they kept a certain amount of attention on them. Of course, this was the same for Principal Kurahashi.

"I haven't asked about the situation with that old woman and the kids. Let's talk about the other adults. You haven't gotten ahold of Yasuzumi-kun's and the others' movements? They should act since their 'daughter' died. Even if it's just as a courtesy."

Yashamaru quipped.

They were aware that Tsuchimikado Natsume was truly a girl from Takiko's report just several hours ago. Supposedly, Tsuchimikado Natsume had posed as a male because of the main family's 'tradition'.

However, Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi's child who was supposed to be Tsuchimikado Yakou's reincarnation should have been a 'son'. When Yasuzumi's late wife - whose maiden name was Wakasugi - had been pregnant, none other than Kurahashi had 'seen' that aura with his own eyes. In other words, Yasuzumi had entrusted his own son to the branch family and raised Natsume as a replacement. Then, he had concealed her gender, raising her as his own son. Yasuzumi's true son was Tsuchimikado Harutora.

Kurahashi dully replied "We still haven't gotten any new information right now" to Yashamaru's question. Yashamaru crossed his arms with a "hmph", turning the chair he sat on around with a clatter.

".....Could it be that Yasuzumi-kun still hasn't picked up on this incident?"

"Impossible, Yasuzumi is an excellent 'diviner'. It's best not to believe that he hasn't noticed his 'son's' awakening or the Raven's Wing's activation."

"Then we haven't gotten ahold of their movements?"

"They're probably watching or waiting for an opportunity, or maybe there are reasons they can't move."

"Hmmm. .....What about Tsuchimikado Harutora? We have to keep him under control, right?"

"Yeah, he's being kept in the Mystical Investigators interrogation room right now."

"That means that there's a possibility that Yasuzumi-kun will show up himself to take back his son?"

"Yasuzumi has Takahiro and Chizuru with him. Takahiro in particular is a powerful former Mystical Investigator and should be taken seriously. But we all know each other in and out. We have Miyachi here."

When Kurahashi had ordered the attack on the Tsuchimikado main family to recapture the Raven's Wing, Yasuzumi from the main family along with Takahiro and Chizuru from the branch family had beaten back the Mystical Investigators that had been dispatched. They had also overwhelmed the commanding National First-Class Onmyouji Yuge Mari, the 'Binding Princess'.

But they had set fire to the residence themselves when faced with Yuge and Miyachi together and had only managed to escape that place by using the Raven's Wing as bait. Miyachi's existence was that decisive with regard to magical fighting power.

"I see. In that case, it seems like it might be good to post Miyachi-kun in the Onmyou Agency temporarily instead of the Exorcist Bureau."

"I've already given those instructions."

"Oh, as expected from Kurahashi. Good work, I'm impressed."

Yashamaru laughed happily. But Kurahashi still continued speaking without a pause.

"Unfortunately, there are other worrisome items. There's a troublesome individual with my mother - the Onmyou Academy."

"Hah? Who?"

"'Shadow'".

"Eh? Really? If I recall, didn't he retire before I died?"

"He resigned as a Mystical Investigator, but afterwards he was taken in by my mother. As Tsuchimikado Natsume's homeroom teacher."

"......Really."

Yashamaru nodded with a surprised appearance.

The so-called 'shadow' was a former top-rate Mystical Investigator who had been a confidant of the 'Divine Fan' Amami Daizen. He was a National First-Class Onmyouji who had obtained the 'Onmyou First-Class' qualifications, and his power was no joke.

"Though he borrowed Kogure's power, that man beat back Domahoshi when he attacked the Onmyou Academy last month. Because of the effects of that magical battle, he was temporarily hospitalized. But he vanished yesterday and his whereabouts are currently unknown."

If Kumomaru was also here, he might have hastily reported that Ohtomo had appeared during the climax of Takiko and Natsume's mock battle. But even if they knew that truth, the fact that they didn't currently know about 'Shadow's whereabouts still wouldn't change.

"Why did it have to be 'Shadow'..... Although he's young, he's very experienced. Moreover, he's someone who was responsible for all of the 'darkness' himself. It's very troublesome for him to become an enemy in this situation."

"That's true about his ability, but the bigger problem is that we have no idea how he's going to move at all. He has the potential to become something completely unexpected for us. It's too dangerous to ignore him."

"Uh..... But, he can't beat Miyachi-kun after all, right?"

"Of course, no practitioner could exist who could beat him in fighting power. But we have to have Miyachi completely focus on dealing with the Tsuchimikado family. Even just the Takahiro-Chizuru pair is as powerful as 'Shadow'. Moreover..... The interior of the Onmyou Agency isn't as solid as a rock either. Miyachi is essential as an overall 'deterrence' as well."

Even among the Onmyouji belonging to the Onmyou Agency, there were powerful practitioners who were inclined towards 'the other side', that was reality. Moreover, Miyachi was the leader and central figure of 'their side's' Onmyouji. If he had to deal with the powerful 'Shadow' as well, the overall balance would easily crumble.

"Then is it reasonable for me to step in? Kumomaru would easily fall for a trap."

"That's not bad, but even if we have you focus on dealing with 'Shadow', it might result in a lot of delay. Although he's Tsuchimikado Harutora's homeroom teacher, he's an uncertain element after all. As I said before, we don't know how he'll move right now."

In the end, if 'Shadow' was harmless - which was very possible - then deliberately dispatching Yashamaru to deal with 'Shadow' would be a waste of effort. Yashamaru had to do what Yashamaru had to do.

Even so, ordinary practitioners would be useless if 'Shadow' truly became hostile. Sending someone weaker would be useless.

"Then what should we do? You 'don't have enough pieces' right now, right?"

Yashamaru freely spoke of his worries.

Kurahashi was the Onmyou Agency Chief, and it wouldn't be too much to call him the most powerful individual in the current magic community. But in the end, that was the situation on the 'surface'. There weren't many people he could 'privately' call on like Yashamaru.

But Kurahashi slowly replied to Yashamaru's worry. "Don't worry, there's a 'suitable person'."

The phone call came when the date was about to change.

The unlit, messy room was dimly illuminated by the light of the television. He was surprised after seeing who was calling. Kurahashi Genji. Seeing as that guy was contacting him personally, it was no ordinary situation.

He suspiciously picked up the phone. Through the voice, he confirmed that there was definitely no mistake, it was Kurahashi himself.

Moreover--

"Your seal is released. Come to the Agency building right away."

"......Right now?"

He checked the time again.

As an exorcist, it wasn't too strange to get an emergency dispatch in the dead of night. If something like a spiritual disaster terrorist attack happened again, it wouldn't even be strange for his seal to be removed.

But it was very abnormal for him to be called to the Onmyou Agency building and not the Exorcist Bureau.

"....."

The meaning of his silence seemed to reach the other side.

"It's undercover work. There's a possibility that a powerful Onmyouji is going to break into the Onmyou Agency. I want you to deal with him."

"Me?"

It was more and more suspicious. That kind of work belonged to the Mystical Investigators, and Kurahashi was currently in the position of Mystical Investigator Chief. He should be able to prepare sufficient manpower no matter how secret the operation was. He didn't need to take the trouble of contacting him himself.

Then, there was only other reason. A powerful target that he couldn't deal with without people at his level of power.

"......Who is it?"

"'Shadow'."

He couldn't help but straighten himself, the laziness he had been feeling until that moment instantly evaporated.

A joke - no, it couldn't be. It was the secret order of that Kurahashi Genji.

Kurahashi repeated his order.

"Independent Exorcist Kagami Reiji. I release your seal. Come to the Agency building immediately."

The savage smile of a hungry wolf emerged on Kagami's face in the unlit, messy room.

Part 4

"Anyway, it's already late. I'll have the bureau members drive you back, so please go back home for today."

Kogure spoke to the Principal and the students who were left behind after Miyachi's departure.

But, what should she do after going back? Kyouko wanted to shout loudly, but she didn't even have the energy left for it. She slumped in the chair she sat in again, unable to even muster the energy to rise.

She would go back to her house, take a hot shower, and go to bed. She would turn off the lights, close her eyes, and not think of anything else. In that case, would she be able to sleep at a time like this? However, even if she slept for a while, reality still wouldn't have changed at all by the time she woke up. That would be true tomorrow and the day after. Forever.

No matter how long she waited, Natsume wouldn't come back again.

.....Ah.....

She shut her eyes and covered her ears, not wanting to admit the reality that invaded her through her skin, stealing away Kyouko's paths of escape. Anguish. Everything was so painful, even breathing, thinking, and feeling. Her mind was about to break down, but that might even be more liberating.

".....Kyouko-chan? Are you alright?"

Tenma couldn't keep watching and spoke up, looking quite bad himself. Of course, she couldn't possibly be alright, and even Tenma should understand that kind of thing. Even so, he couldn't help but voice the question.

".....Thanks."

Just as she managed to softly reply, a middle-aged man flew into the lounge. He was Fujiwara, a practical skills teacher of the Onmyou Academy.

"Principal! Did Ohtomo-kun come here?"

"Eh? What's going on?'

The principal was astonished, and Kogure instantly became alert when he heard Ohtomo's name. Then, the two of them left Kyouko and the others' side, quickly approaching Fujiwara.

...What?

After moving to the corner of the lounge, they started talking busily in voices that kept them from hearing. He didn't know what exactly had happened, but the adults' expressions were extremely serious.

Just then--

"......Hey, we have things to talk about here, so listen."

Touji spoke in a quiet yet sharp tone as the secret talk of the adults floated by from the distance. Tenma and Suzuka turned around in confusion, and Kyouko also looked up.

"After this, I'm going to break into the Onmyou Agency."

A moment of silence.

Before the three of them thought of what to say, Touji forcefully advanced the topic. "Listen up--"

Touji spoke about the last few days - he summarized the incidents that happened right after the Onmyou Academy had reopened. There wasn't much time, so he spoke

very quickly, but the information were coherent. Most of that information was for Kyouko, who had been separated from them after the Onmyou Agency reopened.

About the fire at the Tsuchimikado main family residence and regarding Souma Takiko. According to her, the main family fire had been the work of the Onmyou Agency. Touji asserted that her words were very reliable since she had appeared with the Raven's Wing. Also, regarding Harutora's instability. According to him, there had already been clues before he was possessed by the Raven's Wing. Moreover, he had lost control during the day today and had been stopped by the 'one-armed oni'. At that time, the oni had left some words regarding the Raven's Wing and Saotome Suzu before departing. It seemed that in addition to Kyouko, Tenma and Suzuka hadn't know about that incident either, and their eyes widened in shock.

"Harutora lost control when he noticed the practitioners monitoring the dorm and tracked them down. As a result, though they escaped, it's pretty clear that those practitioners were watchers from the Onmyou Agency based on the situation."

"......Wh-What's going on?"

"In other words, the Onmyou Agency started 'preparing to resurrect Yakou' from the very start. That's why they're monitoring Harutora and the others and why they attacked the main family to steal the Raven's Wing. Takiko said herself that Harutora was from the main family, not Natsume..... Maybe it's as she says. There's a possibility that the Tsuchimikado family noticed the Onmyou Agency's intentions - or saw through them. Hence, they entrusted Harutora, 'Yakou's reincarnation', to the branch family and let him grow up as a branch family member. On the other hand, they had Natsume pose as a male and falsified her as a main family member. So that the Onmyou Agency would look towards Natsume instead of Harutora."

"How could that be....."

Tenma's lips trembled. He shook his head, as if he didn't want to believe rather than he couldn't believe. Kyouko had the same feelings.

But Touji's words were reasonable.

Actually, the Raven's Wing had possessed Harutora and not Natsume.

...Harutora was..... Tsuchimikado Yakou's.....

Moreover, the Onmyou Agency was trying to resurrect Yakou. That assertion was hard to believe in a short period of time. After all, the Onmyou Agency's leader was Kurahashi Genji - Kyouko's father. Though they didn't have the solid familial relationship of an ordinary family, even Kyouko held her father dear.

.....However.

Kyouko had also noticed somewhat. Recently the relationship between her grandmother and father had been strained. Especially her grandmother's attitude. Moreover..... on the other hand, her father attitude to her grandmother had already become extremely distant since a long time ago. Her grandmother and Kyouko might have vanished from her father's eyes a long time ago.

Then, Touji spoke of another thing, the incident after Harutora had escaped from the exorcists.

"I didn't talk about this incident in the interrogation just now--"

He looked at Suzuka after starting off with that. Suzuka also nodded her head. It seemed that the two of them had hidden the information.

Regarding Takiko's shikigami called Yashamaru.

And that his true identity was the resurrection of Dairenji Shidou, Suzuka's father.

Kyouko - and probably Tenma too - almost couldn't keep up. They didn't get it. But Suzuka's expression convinced them of the matter.

The instant she heard that, Kyouko couldn't help but twitch.

...Natsume-chan.....!?

They might be able to resurrect Natsume?

"Don't be ridiculous."

It was Suzuka who spat this.

"Because reviving the dead with the Taizan Fukun Ritual requires a cost..... W-What meaning is there for Bakatora to die in place of Natsume!?"

".....Judging by his tone, it seems like there was another choice."

"How can we trust what that guy says!?"

Loathing clearly emerged in Suzuka's eyes - along with terror.

Dairenji Shidou had once been the leader of the Twin-Horned Syndicate and the mastermind behind the spiritual disaster terrorist attack two years ago. Like Suzuka said, they couldn't trust such a person.

But.

Even so.....

...The Taizan Fukun Ritual.....

A swirl of information and uncontrollable emotions. Kyouko felt overwhelmed by the many choices placed in front of her. She was mentally and physically exhausted and had lost her ability to think. She became dizzy from just letting her guard down. She was buckling from tension and pressure.

The world wobbled.

"Anyway, that's the situation. In short, I believe we can view the Onmyou Agency as the 'enemy's lair'. We can't leave Harutora in that kind of place alone."

"......So you're going to break into the Onmyou Agency and bring that idiot back?'

"Yeah."

"Has the idiot infected you?"

"Maybe."

"How can you do that.....!"

"....."

Touji smiled with a joking attitude at the desperately protesting Suzuka.

He didn't make the slightest excuse, because Touji himself fully realized that he was being foolish and overconfident. Because Touji had unilaterally announced 'I' since the start. 'After this, I'm going to break into the Onmyou Agency'.

As if those were his last words.

"Touji-kun."

Tenma spoke with a bitter expression.

"I understand your feelings, but just like Suzuka-chan says, that's too foolish. Touji-kun, you understand yourself, that's why you didn't invite us, right? Even if you break into the Onmyou Agency, you aren't even sure where Harutora-kun is. And there are definitely people keeping watch. It will definitely be difficult to meet.

"True."

"Then you can't do that. Forcing yourself when you know you'll fail is just 'fleeing'."

Touji reflexively glared at Tenma. But Tenma didn't look away. He endured Touji's anger head-on, grabbing his arm instead.

"Why don't you privately let Kogure-san hear your words from just now or consult the principal? Even Fujiwara-sensei would be okay. In any case, there are other possible paths even if you just explore a little bit. Even taking a long road is better than this kind of rash method..."

Suddenly, the strength drained from Touji's body.

Touji said with an anguished expression:

"......Sorry, Tenma. But that Yashamaru said so. He said that Natsume died without any preparations at all. Even if we can revive her with the Taizan Fukun Ritual, there's not much time left."

Tenma's face twisted and Kyouko finally understood the meaning of Touji's uncharacteristic recklessness.

There wasn't any time left for Harutora. This was the time to 'decide'.

"As you say, there's probably no chance. But even so, I have to act now. There's only tonight. Yashamaru withdrew to give me time to think. Then, the 'time to think' that they gave might become an 'opening'. Right now, I'm betting on this time."

Touji spoke sincerely. Every word reached Kyouko's heart.

"I don't know what Harutora will choose. To be honest, it feels like he'll choose to resurrect Natsume by sacrificing himself. Then there's no helping it. I think that's alright. But before that, before Harutora decides, I want to see him again no matter what. I want to witness that guy's decision."

"......Touji-kun....."

Tenma powerlessly released Touji's arm that he was grabbing on to after hearing those quite words.

Touji deliberately mimicked his usual style, grinning callously and without a care.

"The only thing I can say is that I definitely won't choose to return to the dorm and sleep until tomorrow. So I'll act, even if it's reckless..... I still have to act."

...!?

The moment she heard that, hard-to-describe emotions poured forth as if the dam had broken.

What she had thought. Returning to her home, taking a hot shower, going to bed. Turning off the lights, closing her eyes, and not thinking about anything else. Then sleeping for a time..... welcoming the 'tomorrow' without Natsume or Harutora.

She couldn't do it.

It wasn't just Touji. She couldn't do it either.

Then, there was no choice, right?

"I'll go too."

Tenma and Suzuka, and even Touji, looked at Kyouko in surprise.

"I'll..... go too."

She looked at the three through her tear-stained vision.

Touji's expression changed, and he lightly nodded with a serious attitude. Tenma bit his lip, and Suzuka clicked her tongue loudly.

"".....You're so idiotic....."

After saying that, Suzuka stared into space. Not long afterwards, she shook her head strongly, cursing meaninglessly a few times.

Then, she said with a straight face:

"......What's the plan?"

"Suzuka."

Sorry, Touji said with a fervent voice.

He quickly checked the principal and the others.

"It will be suspicious if we disappear now. Let's first get sent to our houses and then reconvene at the Onmyou Agency."

"......Alright, is that okay with you too, Kyouko?"

She nodded. Then, Kyouko shot Tenma a look.

Tenma was still deep in thought with a solemn expression. Perhaps Tenma was the only 'normal' one present. He desperately racked his brains, trying to save his friends from their stupid actions.

But--

"....."

In the end, he closed his eyes and hung his head. This was the moment everyone made their decision. Perhaps it was a step towards destruction. Indeed, they couldn't know what was waiting ahead of them. Kyouko and the others would be stepping into deep darkness from now on.

Just then.

...Eh?

Her vision suddenly shook. It was the feeling she had experienced before at the start. It suddenly became a huge wave that engulfed Kyouko. It engulfed and battered her - pressing down on her.

The world spun. She became detached from reality.

Then, she saw it. There was a faint light around the motionless Tenma across from her.

.....Eh?

It was only for a moment. When she came to her senses, the three of them were in the same flow of time as they had been in before. They hadn't noticed Kyouko's abnormality.

".....What about you, Glasses? What are you going to do?"

Suzuka asked brusquely. Tenma didn't reply immediately, his head lowered.

But after some time.

".....Yeah."

He nodded.

...What? .....What? Just now?

Goosebumps rose over her whole body. Kyouko couldn't help but wrap her arms around herself. The 'abnormality' inside her body was extremely scary.

"...! Headband."

"Yeah."

Suzuka quietly warned him and Touji replied silently. The adults had finished their discussion and were coming back. They also had profound expressions. It seemed like everything was out of control and everyone was afflicted by anxiety.

We.....

What will happen in the future?

The future was right before her, but she couldn't even see the dawn. The long night continued without end.

Amidst this, the light she had seen just now, the momentary faint light, was still deeply imprinted in her mind. That dim light tried to illuminate Kyouko's path.

This far is enough. Saying this, Tenma got off the car the bureau member drove.

Tenma's home was in a complicated district located between old roads and thin, narrow alleys. Hence, it was difficult for cars to enter if they weren't residents. After watching the car that had sent him home leave, Tenma walked into a dark alley.

So many things had happened that his mind was half-paralyzed. While feeling as if he were half-asleep, Tenma walked towards his home with unstable steps.

After this, he would first return home and then bring all of his charms to the Onmyou Agency. He almost didn't have enough time. However, it didn't feel real. The sense of reality from when he had been together with everyone dissipated and scattered everywhere.

He was probably standing at a fork right now. He was standing in front of a giant choice that would completely change his life.

He understood this, but his feelings couldn't keep up at all. This was a 'terrible' situation. Or rather, this was unexpectedly the moment of a so-called life changing decision.

...No.....

That was wrong. If he thought carefully, he had always lived while being pushed by those around him. This was the same. There was no change at all.

Tenma had relied on everyone around him to get through the early deaths of his parents. Since then, that had become the 'trend' for his way of life. From the looks of it, it seemed that he had ended up choosing that way of living.

But there was no happiness or regret.

Perhaps he wouldn't regret this 'choice' either. That was all he had confidence in. Even if he lived by being pushed around by those around him, he truly chose his 'direction'. In his own way.

"......That's right. Definitely."

The moment he said that, the scattered sense of reality returned.

Invading the Onmyou Agency and bringing Harutora back. A bold attempt that scared even himself.

But this time, Tenma would firmly grit his teeth and do it for real. To be honest, he didn't know how it would turn out. Though he didn't know, he would do it. It was very unexpected, but Tenma frankly accepted his determination. Maybe he would be tortured or regret it so much that he would want to die..... Even so, he wouldn't look back. Despite his regret, he wouldn't look back.

Therefore, advance.

"......Yeah."

He slightly sped up his pace. He quickly returned home, in order to return to everyone's side.

He saw his home around the corner. Pain flashed through his heart.

The lights were on.

His grandfather and grandmother still hadn't slept. His quick steps became rooted to the ground.

...Grandfather..... Grandmother.....

Perhaps the Exorcist Bureau that had interrogated him had contacted his relatives. They might be worried and waiting for him. Incredibly apologetic feelings spilled forth in his heart. But he had to betray those apologetic feelings and return to everyone's side. Even if he betrayed the tenderness of two people.

"....."

He made his decision and began walking again.

Just then.

"You're too slow."

He felt as if his heart stopped.

He looked in the direction the voice came from. In front of Tenma's home crouched a small figure on a patch of ground surrounded by hedges. She stood up while muttering after seeing that Tenma had noticed her. Even when she stood, she was far shorter than Tenma.

Shadows were cast around the hedges because the lights were on at his home. Emotionless eyes calmly stared at Tenma from those shadows. As his eyes adjusted, he identified a human face. A recognized and unexpected face.

".....Y-You're from that time.....!?"

The girl they had encountered while Ohtomo had been hospitalized and they had gone to visit him. 'That' senpai that Harutora would occasionally mention. He remembered that she was called - Suzu.

"Good evening, Glasses-kun."

"G-Good evening..... Eeeh!? Wh-What are you doing here?"

"Are you an idiot?"

"Hah?"

"Can't you see?"

"W-Well..... I don't understand."

"I was waiting for you."

"Eh? Waiting for me? Why..... A-And why do you know where my home is....."

"I'm super-smart, so there's nothing I don't know."

The girl was expressionless throughout, speaking dully and seemingly taking it for granted. He wasn't sure what the situation was at all. It was as if he were being tricked by a fox.

In the first place, he had only seen her on the road and hadn't even said a word to her. He had just watched her talk with Harutora from a distance. He basically hadn't met her in person. Even she had only called him 'Glasses'.

But why?

The girl sighed at the speechless, frozen Tenma.

"Unreliable."

"E-Even if you say that....."

"Then, what are you preparing to do?"

"EH?

"Are you going to break into the Onmyou Agency?"

He was stunned. Tenma stared so hard his eyes almost popped out.

"......Wh-Why....."

"Ah, as expected. Ato Touji seemed like he wouldn't be able to sit still, and Kurahashi Kyouko was the same."

"......No....."

"Dairenji Suzuka was a bit unexpected. I guess she has the courage to oppose her father."

"Wha!?"

He couldn't even finish the word.

...Why!? Why did this person--!?

Why did she even know about those things? The choices that they had just decided and the information that they had shared only with each other. She couldn't possibly know. Definitely not. However.....

What kind of god was this girl?

As if reading Tenma's mind, "I'm super smart, so there's nothing I don't know." The girl indifferently stated.

Then--

"Let the super-smart me tell you. It won't work. If this goes on, you'll obviously fail."

"....."

They couldn't win.

He didn't know who this girl was or what she planned to do, but indeed, she was an opponent that he couldn't beat at his best. There was no meaning in pretending to resist. It would just be wasting time.

That was why he could only ask this.

"......What are you telling me to do?"

An almost rude question.

But the girl nodded in praise with a surprised look. "Oh my, very good question."

Then, she slowly said.

"My name is Saotome Suzu."

"...!"

He instantly comprehended. Instinctively, not rationally. The moment he heard her name, the girl who had been shrouded in mystery up until now--

...I see.

He thought.

Saotome Suzu. The researcher of the Raven's Wing. Ohtomo's former classmate. Though he really couldn't see that she was the same age as Ohtomo and Kogure, he didn't feel that it was inexplicable. Rather, it was convincing.

After all, she was the person Ohtomo had evaluated as 'hard to deal with'.

Moreover, she was the person that Touji said the 'one-armed oni' had brought up.

Ask her for help if there's an emergency - he had said that.

His expression seemed to have changed while he wasn't paying attention. The girl - Saotome Suzu - said "good" after seeing Tenma's face and nodded.

Then--

"Listen. Ato Touji, Kurahashi Kyouko, and Dairenji Suzuka. Those three have already been marked. That's natural. A living spirit like Ato touji, the daughter of the Kurahashi family famed in the magic community, and the 'Child Prodigy' of the Twelve Divine Generals. If those 'significant' three people are around Tsuchimikado Natsume and Tsuchimikado Harutora, they couldn't possibly escape people's eyes. Those three can't overturn the entire situation at this point. Ohtomo Jin, the Tsuchimikado family, and I are all the same too. Even I'm being marked."

"Therefore," Saotome expressionlessly continued speaking. She didn't express any feelings - but she wove words formed from a strong will.

"Therefore - Momoe Tenma. You're the key. I can almost do nothing more, and this is probably the last I can do. I..... am 'betting' on you."

Chapter 3 - Bared Fangs

Part 1

"You've become pretty."

Her heart almost burst because of his unexpected words.

But his compliment was correct. The surrounding gazes aimed at her were clearly different from before. Especially the males. The people who had bullied and looked down on her as children seemed to have become different people, casting toady gazes at her.

She didn't feel happy at all. She was unhappy and resentful. She felt contempt and disgust at the males attracted by her appearance.

But only he was different. Only the change in the way he treated her made her feel terrified and anxious yet also sweet and joyous. His discomfort and embarrassment - more than terror and fear - made her feel happy and joyful.

"You're my shikigami, don't forget that."

'Of course', she said with a smile to the upset him. She was happier than ever, so much that she even felt anxious, but even so, she still vowed seriously.

My loyalty is not to your family.

Only to you, Tsuchimikado Yakou--

A locked door. Simple lighting. Inlaid windows. One table and two chairs.

This was the entire room. Harutora sat motionlessly in one of the chairs in the center of the room.

A tight barrier had been set in the room. Hence, he couldn't even sense his own aura. It was as if he had returned to his self from a year ago, his still ignorant self. The ignorant, innocent and irresponsible time when he had frolicked with Touji and Hokuto.

His life just a short year before.

But it was like a different person's life. Or, was the current reality just a dream? After he woke up, would he still be ignorantly frolicking with Touji and Hokuto?

"......Ugh."

That time with Hokuto. Her shikigami self left a charm in Harutora's hand after vanishing.

Then, today. Harutora had learned that Natsume had been the practitioner controlling Hokuto..... then, she had dyed Harutora's hands with her own blood and died.

Harutora stared at his palms. They were still clammy with Natsume's blood. As proof of his irreparable 'crime'.

...Natsume.....

Suddenly, their childhood promise awoke in his mind.

...Okay, I'll become Natsume-chan's shikigami. We'll be together forever, and I'll protect Natsume-chan forever.

He had announced this and they had woven the magic of a promise together. Entwining pinky with pinky.

Right, he had indeed promised that to Natsume.

A promise he had once broken.

Right now, he had broken it again. He hadn't been able to protect his master, and in addition, Natsume had lost her life because of him.

Thinking back to the time with Hokuto, Natsume had also sacrificed her shikigami to help Harutora. Then, Natsume had helped Harutora again today by self-sacrifice.

How could he call himself a shikigami.

"......!"

He tightly clenched his hands, his eyes bloodshot. He gritted his teeth with all his strength.

His crime. No matter what, he had to repent for that crime. .....No, the words weren't as pretty as that. Hate. He couldn't suffer Natsume's death and couldn't tolerate her absence. Currently, Natsume didn't exist anywhere in the world. This moment without Natsume would continue to exist forever. It was a hard-to-stand pain that practically destroyed his heart. His heart agonized as if it were being scorched.

Because of that.....

Yashamaru's previous proposal wouldn't leave his mind. It had invaded him. Even though he clearly knew somewhere in his heart that it was an obvious 'mistake'.

It was a curse.

"Shit."

Suzuka's figure emerged in his mind. Have you forgotten what you told me 'back then'? The sound of that girl's shout resounded in his heart.

It was completely as she had said. Harutora hadn't understood how it was to lose someone important. Not only had he let Natsume die, he had also hurt Suzuka. He had been selfish and irresponsible.

Even so.....

As expected, he couldn't give up on Natsume.

Just like Suzuka had scolded him for, he was despicable. But his decision would no longer change.

The future was suddenly closed off in a thick darkness, and he stood in place with nowhere to go. However, there was a faint light in the depths of the darkness, indicating a path.

That path had to lead to a path in even deeper darkness. A path full of shadows, chill, and rancid taboo.

The forbidden soul magic. The Taizan Fukun Ritual.

But even if it were the devil's contract, he wouldn't hesitate.

"....."

Harutora's eyes housed a cold, penetrating light.

He would resurrect Natsume using the Taizan Fukun Ritual. That was 'decided'. The next question was 'how' to use that ritual.

The most reasonable way would be to ask Suzuka. It didn't matter if Harutora's life were the price.

But it was very difficult to pull off. Suzuka definitely wouldn't agree. In the first place, it wasn't certain that he would be able to obtain the help of his companions. No, they might even oppose him. Especially the adults, they wouldn't agree. Regardless of whether it was the principal or Ohtomo, they wouldn't approve of Harutora using banned magic. He couldn't even rely on his parents. After all, he couldn't contact them.

Moreover--

... 'I hope that you remember that even if you prepare to carry out the Taizan Fukun Ritual, your time is extremely limited.'

It was extremely maddening, but right now his feelings were irrelevant. His determination wouldn't change even if he had to make a contract with the devil. Since there were no choices left for him, then he wouldn't hesitate.

But in the end, this was all based on the great premise of 'Natsume's resurrection'.

Yashamaru had also said that 'there might be some 'additional conditions. *For example, if Natsume became like Yashamaru - if she awoke as 'Takiko's shikigami' just like Dairenji Shidou..... should Harutora accept the proposal? His personal feelings towards Takiko were an irrelevant problem now. On the other hand, since Takiko had the Raven's Wing, then there was a very high probability that she is on the same side as the 'enemy' that had attacked the Tsuchimikado main family residence. To Natsume, awakening as the shikigami serving the person in that position might be a fate worse than death.*

First, Yashamaru had said this. Since he was named 'Yashamaru' and not 'Dairenji Shidou', then technically speaking, he was a different person - he wasn't 'human'.

In other words, it was possible that what Yashamaru called 'awakening' was different from Natsume's 'resurrection'. The other party might see it as a slight difference, but to him it might be a huge disparity.

The only thing he could say for sure was that in the end, the opponents were aiming at him - though that was hard to believe - as Tsuchimikado Yakou's reincarnation, not Natsume. Yashamaru had purposefully expressed that they were 'abnormal negotiations'.

Harutora couldn't determine whether he was Yakou or not. But at least Yashamaru, Takiko, and the others believed so. And to them, Natsume's resurrection was just a bargaining chip. There were no negotiations he could trust any more than his negotiations with them.

...But, is there no other.....

Harutora tightly shut his eyes.

What exactly did Takiko and the others want to do by capturing this useless reincarnation? Or would they make him awaken after this? If he regained his memories from his past life, would he become able to wield powerful magic? But, so? What were they preparing to do? Come to think of it.....

Why had Yakou reincarnated?

What exactly did Yakou want to do? Maybe that was related to what Takiko and the others were planning? Harutora didn't know Takiko's true goal either.

...That girl..... Who was she?

".....Damn....."

He didn't have enough information. His definite information was exceedingly insufficient. He hated his ignorance from the bottom of his heart. Why hadn't he studied more, understood more, or seriously asked questions before things became like this? It was the first time since he was born that he regretted being lazy.

"...Damn!"

Harutora stood up from the chair, unable to stand the silence. He paced around the room with rough footsteps to get over the agitated emotions filling his body. But even this couldn't suppress them.

In the end, he shouted out loudly and hit the glass of the inlaid window.

"Damn."

He growled, angrily glaring daggers at the idiot reflected in the window.

Then, he noticed.

The corner of his left eye. The pentagram mark had vanished.

...Wha!?

Suddenly, he felt as if his heart had been grabbed.

The proof that he had become Natsume's shikigami. The magical pattern that had guided Harutora to become an Onmyouji. It had vanished. As if the bond between the two of them had been cut because of Natsume's death.

Tears welled up.

...Why.....

His body's strength dwindled. Harutora leaned against the window as if he had collapsed, knocking it with his forehead. The whole room creaked.

...Natsume.....

".....Natsume....."

His heart was sad and grieving.

Harutora leaned listlessly against the window as if his power source had been cut off.

He didn't know how long he stayed motionless like that.

Suddenly--

Something moved in the corner of his vision.

He slowly moved his gaze, not thinking about anything. Outside the window. Something was stuck on the window.

A bug. It was a spider.

A spider as small as his thumbnail. It crawled curiously back and forth on the other side of the window, across from Harutora. It moved right, moved left, and moved upward and to the right and then down..... Repeating the same movement several times. Moreover, it kept moving along the same trail, but it didn't seem to be weaving a web.

Right. Left and down. Up. To the right and down. Left and up. Then to the right again.

Harutora followed the spider's movements in a trance. He kept watching for a long time--

At some point, he realized.

".....Wha!"

The spider had been tracing a pattern since the beginning.

A pentagram.

He inadvertently put his hands on the glass, staring at the spider outside. It wasn't wrong. That spider was making the exact same movements and drawing a pentagram. He was taken aback. His wretched mood left him and he became purely and simply surprised. Harutora's eyes widened.

Along with that, the spider seemed to understand that Harutora had noticed it, and changed its continuous movements.

It quickly drew a pattern, snaking around as if dividing a circle into right and left. It repeated that a second time, and then he noticed when it repeated the third time. It

was the Taijitu. The image representing yin and yang. Then, after Harutora became aware, the spider started another different movement.

"This thing..... is it!?"

...A shikigami!?

Harutora's spirit-seeing ability had been sealed because of the barrier set in the room. But the movements of the spider before him clearly were not the movements of an ordinary bug. Moreover, though he couldn't see clearly through the glass, this spider was blue. It was a blue spider in an even deeper color than Swallow Whips.

Harutora stared motionlessly at the spider sticking to the outside of the window.

...Whose..... Whose shikigami was it? Why was it here? No, what was it here for?

His paralyzed mind rapidly started spinning. This spider - what did the shikigami's master want? The only thing he knew was that the other party wanted to establish contact with Harutora. Otherwise it wouldn't deliberately make these movements to catch Harutora's attention.

However, there was another important point.

...No matter who the master of this thing was..... He wasn't with Takiko's group.

If he were one of Takiko's companions, he wouldn't have used such a roundabout method. Moreover, he didn't think it was Touji and the others. He immediately thought of Ohtomo, but he didn't feel it was him either. Then his parents? There was that possibility, but how could they know where he was?

"Damn!"

The spider shikigami seemed to lack the power to pass through the room's barrier. Since the Onmyou Agency had prepared this room's barrier to restrain practitioners, it wasn't easy to break even for a top-notch Onmyouji.

But the spider didn't give up at all, continuing to move before Harutora. Then, it finally started tracing 'words'. One word after another..... But it was difficult to spend time reading the spider's movements while racking his brains.

...Who? Who was it?

A mysterious practitioner who was attempting to come in contact with Harutora.

Then as you wish. Harutora grinned resignedly and impolitely. He put his thumb against his teeth, breaking the skin.

He ignored the pain, using his welling blood to write hiragana starting with 'あ' on the glass window. An intense change came over the spider's movements. After it circled around a few times, it started moving on the other side of the window when he finished the 'さ'. It moved from character to character.

い.

い.

そ.

Harutora mumbled, closely following the marks in the corner of the window. The spider moved around as it willed.

い,い,ぞ.

...Alright!

The devil had offered his hand, and now it was a spider. But - good. To the current Harutora, it didn't matter if it was straw or a spider as long as he could grab on to it. Seeing that his bloody characters had already started drying, he bit his finger again.

Needless to say, Harutora didn't know. Even if he had heard of the legends of Kibi no Makibi, who had brought back the Onmyoudou codex '金鸟玉兔集' from the Tang Dynasty and had controlled 'spiders' to save the life of Abe no Seimei's ancestor, Abe no Nakamaro, he didn't remember them.

However, unbeknownst to him--

The progeny of the Tsuchimikado prepared to entrust his life to the guidance of the spider again.

Part 2

He didn't return messages, nor did he pick up his phone.

As a result, Touji, Kyouko, and Suzuka could only give up on meeting up with Tenma.

Touji came from the dorm, Kyouko from her residence, and Suzuka from her apartment. After leaving the Exorcist Bureau and being sent to their various homes, they secretly snuck out and gathered back up. Kyouko had changed from her yukata into clothes easier to move around in.

"....."

Touji silently checked the time. How many times had Touji repeated that action? They had already wasted quite a bit of time. Even if there was still a long time until dawn, they didn't have time to waste.

Tenma's home was by Gokukuji. Though it was the farthest from Akihabara, it shouldn't have been too difficult for him to slip out undetected compared to Kyouko who had been with the principal and Suzuka whose life had been monitored by the Onmyou Agency since the incident last year. If he had taken a taxi like the three of them, he should have gotten here long ago.

Even if something had happened, it was very strange that they had no contact from him. It looked like they could only believe that Tenma 'wasn't coming'.

Unexpectedly, Suzuka was the angriest.

"That wimpy Glasses really just left us. Well, I didn't expect much out of him to begin with! But what's good about abandoning everyone and just saving yourself? Is he stupid!?"

She cursed resentfully, her face red. Suzuka's tone wasn't like her style. Rather, it might be proof that she was showing her true feelings.

The place the three of them met up was one of the ticket gates of the JR Akihabara station. The rolling door had already been locked, and it was empty. But there was a twenty-four-hour store nearby, and quite a few cars going by even in the dead of night. If three underage kids were roaming around at this kind of time, even patrolling police wouldn't ignore them.

"......Let's go."

Touji spoke readily after checking the time one last time. Then, he strode out without saying anything else.

However, Suzuka stared at her feet and didn't move. "Suzuka-chan....." Kyouko spoke to her as if to console her.

"It's excusable..... Rather, Tenma made a decision in his own way. Unfortunately, Tenma's practical skills are bad..... he might become a burden instead."

"......Even so."

Suzuka gritted her teeth, unwilling to agree.

"Don't just run away.....!"

Tenma's practical skills were clearly inferior to the three present. But Suzuka even had her strength limited, and things varied depending on their opponent. Considering the 'adults' that might be waiting for them in the Onmyou Agency, a small difference in ability might not be too meaningful.

Even if Suzuka was here, it was because she wanted to stay with everyone. She wanted to act together with her companions.

Tenma's actions mocked those feelings of Suzuka's. Hence, it made her mad and she wouldn't forgive him.

"Suzuka-chan....."

Unlike Suzuka, Kyouko didn't plan on blaming Tenma. Kyouko had felt despaired once in the Meguro branch when she had faced the rampaging Shaver before. If not for Tenma extending a supporting hand, she would have left the battle and crouched on the ground.

But, "Don't blame Tenma." She didn't use that to persuade Suzuka. She could understand Suzuka's feelings.

Then--

"That's enough."

Touji stopped striding out.

He spoke to Suzuka, who was thinking about refuting her immediately:

"Just like Kyouko says, it's very likely that Tenma backed off. Staying behind was the correct choice."

"But! I-Isn't that guy also one of our--"

Friends..... The next, trembling word vanished from her mouth.

Touji - even at such a time - was smiling slightly wryly. After all, no matter how much the people around her teased her, Suzuka wouldn't admit that she was one of Harutora and the others' 'friends'.

Touji faced Suzuka again, saying:

"Suzuka, Tenma's good point is that he's not as reckless as us, he does things properly. Hence, even if we screw up, there's still Tenma - if you think that way,

you'll feel a lot more at ease, right? Even if he's not here, that guy will help us in his own way."

He was half-saying it for himself too. In contrast to the contents of his words, Touji's expression seemed lonely and regretful.

"Anyway, let's go. It's not wise to break in during dawn."

Touji started walking with those completely relaxed words, not stopping this time. Though Suzuka hung her head for some time, she finally started walking. Seeing this, Kyouko also followed behind them.

It was less than a ten minute walk from the station to the Onmyou Agency.

"Let me say this first....."

Touji spoke while walking.

"I'm ashamed to say it when I proposed this, but unfortunately, we don't know about the interior of the Onmyou Agency. I don't have any thoughts about our plans for breaking in either. If you have any ideas, say them now."

Of the three of them, Suzuka was the most familiar with the agency building. Though Kyouko had visited the agency building with her grandmother and father several times, Suzuka had dealings with the agency building as a National First-Class Onmyouji before.

However--

".....Then let me first say that no one has a full grasp of the agency building's structure. Actually, it's almost like a maze deep inside there."

Suzuka consciously switched the mood, replying to Touji.

The Onmyou Agency building had been renovated and expanded several times since it was an old structure that had been built not long after the war, but there were still a large portion left over and many places that had stayed the same. This was because of the Onmyou Agency's nature, as the spiritual and magical aspect added difficulty to the construction and the construction couldn't be done while the building was being used. Though the Onmyou Academy building had been reconstructed last year, unlike the Onmyou Academy classes, the Onmyou Agency work couldn't be interrupted that easily.

Moreover, the Onmyouji made specific and special instructions because of the renovations and expansions, so every time the agency building was worked on, it became an increasingly specific structure. Though they did not interfere with normal operations, there were dead ends everywhere that wouldn't be noticed during normal work. Even among the agency members, people who had a grasp of its 'entirety' were an extreme minority.

Actually, Suzuka had carried out her research of the Taizan Fukun Ritual forbidden magic in a secret research lab in the agency building. That was also because Suzuka wasn't used to being 'outside' the Onmyou Agency, and so she didn't have a choice, but as a result, her research had progressed without any hindrances. Naturally, she had laid down thorough seals and barrier, and in addition, she had been partitioned from the neighboring room by a wall, as if she had been in a cut-off magical space.

"......In other words, it's hard to attack and hard to defend. Not bad."

"Idiot. No matter how hard it is to defend, it's obvious that the opponents have an overwhelming advantage."

"The opponents don't only have an overwhelming advantage in terms of position."

"But, Suzuka-chan, you're the one who knows it the best among us. Do you have any idea about ways to break in or the like?"

A bitter expression emerged on Suzuka's face at Kyouko's sincere question.

"......Anyways, we can break through the barrier around the whole agency building and the security guards at the entrance. I can also think of several places that Bakatora might have been thrown into....."

The results of Touji's sudden strategizing were obvious and he came up with results instantly. The agency building's security was of a normal level. At the least, they could 'expect' that.

But they should expect that there was strict surveillance set up around Harutora. In that case, finding Harutora would be far trickier than slipping into the agency building.

"Of course, Bakatora's magical energy has to be sealed. All we can do is investigate everywhere we can think of and look everywhere that seems suspicious."

"Okay, then we had better get moving."

After saying this, Touji quickened his pace. Suzuka also sped up, doggedly following after Touji. Needless to say, Kyouko also hastened her steps, but.....

She thought absentmindedly.

If Tenma were here, then maybe he would be able to make everyone feel more secure even if he was anxious and panicked - something like that. Even if they were pushed back, maybe he would provide a cautious opinion and right their path - something like that.

She thought of the inexplicable feeling she had when they had parted from him at the Exorcist Bureau. She had seen - she had seemed to see a faint light from Tenma.

Maybe that had really been an illusion or something else. Something like a daydream that her heart had seen because of her pain and exhaustion.

Kyouko vigorously shook her head.

She had to focus on the present right now. She had to think of a way to see Harutora and talk about Natsume's matter.

Afterwards, the three of them wordlessly and silently moved with quick strides.

Several minutes later, the Onmyou Agency entered their vision.

At--

--Almost the same time.

A small black car stopped in an alley near the Onmyou Agency building.

A man with a fake leg came down from the driver's seat. Then, a young boy came out of the car from the backseat across from the driver's seat.

A boy who was about elementary school age, who would make one think of reproaching him for not being asleep at this kind of time. Moreover, the way he dressed was pretentious and intriguing. A black jacket, vest, and pants. He was dressed in black from head to toe, and had a bowtie around his neck.

Moreover, though it was the dead of night, his eyes were covered with sunglasses. Sunglasses with lenses as red as blood.

The boy looked up from behind the back of Ohtomo, who had exited the car first--

"Heh."

He laughed with a mysteriously mature attitude.

"......I didn't think that this old man recognized by that Abe no Seimei would be called and ordered in the dead of night around by a brat not even thirty years old. You never know what will happen, even if you've lived for a few hundred years."

The boy - Ashiya Doman - spoke pretentiously with a jovial tone.

Ohtomo glanced at him expressionlessly, asking:

"......Do you dislike it?"

"How could I?"

Doman chuckled, his mood good. Ohtomo snorted coldly.

To put it bluntly, he hadn't intended this. Doman definitely wasn't someone he could trust. It was extremely dangerous. And that danger exceeded the scope that Ohtomo could deal with.

But there was no other way. He had used all the cards he could have. Right, he had sworn in front of Natsume.

"...So? Let me confirm, your goal isn't to get revenge for your dead disciple, it's to steal back the imprisoned one, right? That reincarnation of Tsuchimikado Yakou?"

The boy leaned into the car again as he asked this, taking something out of the backseat with a clatter.

It was a case with wheels on the bottom - a suitcase.

"Did you know?"

"About what?"

"That Tsuchimikado Harutora was the reincarnation."

"Heh, you overestimate me."

"Really?"

"Of course."

"Great, then there's still a chance of becoming friends with you, Priest."

"......Hmm? It felt like you just said something quite arrogant, or was I wrong?"

Doman frowned, extending the handle of the suitcase. This time, Ohtomo didn't glance at him again.

Needless to say, he wanted to get revenge for Natsume. He obviously wanted to.

But Ohtomo fully understood that pure revenge was no good. Revenge was just self-satisfaction. Regardless of how many elaborate words he wove, they wouldn't reach the dead. Because it was an idiotic and shameless thing to push revenge onto others just because he couldn't accept it - just because 'he himself' couldn't stand it.

If he wanted to do as the dead wished, then he had to turn those thoughts towards the living.

"But to be honest, I didn't think you would force yourself this much."

"Really? It's purely a rational decision."

"In any case, you're allowing this old man to have fun."

"......I truly feel like being an ara-mitama and bored to tears would really be the worst."

Ohtomo responded coldly to the outwardly innocent and joyful Doman.

But Ohtomo hadn't thought he was forcing himself like Doman mentioned.

The greatest strength of an 'individual' with an 'organization' as his opponent was speed. Responding quickly was the key to victory. Hence, he would fight and win quickly. There was no room for hesitation in the optimal choice.

More importantly, there was no room for trickery or strategy this time. It was the simplest surprise attack.

Break in and steal.

Ohtomo knew extremely well how effectively pure, uncalculated force could instantly take control of a situation and lead to the goal.

"What kind of level do you think the 'enemy' is on?"

"In general, they're high level..... But I don't think they're completely unbeatable."

"Hm, Of the current members, I'm expecting the most from 'Enma'."

"If possible, I hope we can avoid him."

"Then are the 'numbers'."

"I think we should be able to gain the upper hand if the problem is just 'numbers'."

"Kuku..... Let me advise you, that thinking is 'naive'."

".....Indeed, I'm being overconfident. My apologies."

They actually had an extremely serious conversation in tones that didn't seem particularly serious. It wasn't bad. A sharp feeling of tension. It felt like his 'instinct' from his Mystical Investigator time had returned. The efficiency and humility that had been cut off from him. He gradually organized his battle state.

"Alright, there's something I wish to ask of you. I'm expecting a lot."

"Leave it to this old man, I'm raring to go."

He couldn't trust Doman. But there was no partner more capable than him in the 'strength' aspect. He was extremely fortunate that he 'didn't need to worry'. He didn't need to fight while protecting anyone. It had been a long time since he had been able to seriously focus on his own magic.

If he wanted to do as the dead wished, then he had to turn those thoughts towards the living, Ohtomo believed.

But, putting that aside for now--

"......Allow me to resolve things."

Unbeknownst to Harutora and the others, Ohtomo quietly proclaimed with an expression behind his glasses that they probably would have difficulty imagining.

The warm night wind slowly blew by.

Just then. His phone received a message. It was from the principal. Though he wanted to just check it out of obligation, he couldn't ignore it when he saw the subject, and he continued and displayed the contents.

He read over it once.

"......Hah."

He smiled happily.

Apparently, Kyouko had vanished from her home.

He instantly realized. Just like before, it was his obtrusive, serious, reliable, and lovable students. They were well-focused tonight. Though he felt it wasn't like his style, he couldn't help but feel proud of his students.

He couldn't let them endure any more pain. He definitely couldn't let them run into any more suffering.

He could understand the feelings of Kyouko and the others.

But.

"...Sorry, Kyouko-kun. This is the only thing I can't permit. This is 'adult's work'."

He didn't believe there was a need to return the principal's message. He had already submitted his resignation. Thanking the principal's insight for suggesting this, Ohtomo put his phone away.

"Then, let's go, Priest. The plan will be as we just said."

"Very well."

Thunk - his cane and fake leg made noise as Ohtomo face the Onmyou Agency and took a step.

Part 3

Click. The sound of the opening lock resounded through the room. Harutora's body shivered and he instantly tried to hide the window behind his back, turning around.

The door had been opened from the outside.

A voice came from the other side of the opened door.

"...Come out."

Harutora's face pulled taut.

...They were here.

Fortunately, the person who opened the door wasn't planning on entering the room. Though he had been surprised, Harutora used his hand to try wiping the bloody characters on the window's glass. He couldn't wipe off all of the sticky blood, but the characters were smudged for now. There was no helping it. There wasn't enough time.

"......What's wrong?"

The voice came again. An unexpectedly composed tone. Harutora slowly sucked in a breath and then cautiously walked out of the room.

Even so, the room that Harutora had been held in wasn't directly linked to the corridor outside. There was a narrow space like a reception room in the middle. It was probably the space the people monitoring him stayed.

Even so, his spirit-seeing ability returned the moment before he stepped outside the room, since he had walked out of the barrier. At the same time, he noticed the aura of the person who had opened the door and spoken.

No, it wasn't a 'person'.

"...You bastard!?"

It was the shikigami with Takiko. He recalled that he was called Kumomaru. He had his hand on the opened door, seeming to be waiting for Harutora to come out. Perhaps his shikigami self couldn't enter the barrier of the sealed room. Kumomaru calmly closed the door in front of Harutora who had retreated and taken a stance.

Then--

"......Sorry."

"What?"

"Even if I'm sorry, it'll just make you unhappy, but even so I still want to apologize."

"....."

His outrage at Takiko awoke in his mind. Just like Kumomaru said, his anger spilled forth. A compassionate expression emerged on Kumomaru's face as he silently endured Harutora's gaze steaming with killing intent.

The first time he saw this shikigami was after Natsume and Takiko's mock battle ended. His messy hair was tied behind his head and he wore an M-51 military jacket, jeans, and laced leather boots. His lithe and trained figure resembled that of an ascetic athlete.

He appeared to be of a similar age as him. But something thoughtful and composed could be felt from his deep eyes.

Come to think of it, Yashamaru was Dairenji Shidou after awakening as a shikigami.

Could this person be--?

"......Were you also a human before?"

"Yeah, my previous name was Mutobe Chihiro. I worked as Chief Dairenji's subordinate before. I was once in the Lingering Spirit Division of the Imperial Household Agency."

Harutora tensed up even further when he heard of the Lingering Spirit Division.

"In other words, you used to be a Twin-Horned Syndicate member too?"

"Right. I was also related with the spiritual disaster terrorist attack this spring. I 'died' immediately after."

"...!"

Harutora was dumbfounded by Kumomaru's dull, indifferent words. Kumomaru wasn't particularly bothered by Harutora's speechless appearance. "Come." He stepped forward.

"....."

Harutora's alert gaze shot out to behind Kumomaru's back. But the opponent had the advantage. There was no meaning even if he resisted here. He should obediently comply for now. Harutora walked forward behind Kumomaru.

In that period of time--

...Kon?

He didn't speak, solely searching for her aura. She was there. Harutora was more relieved than he would have imagined.

Kon was the defensive shikigami who was always with Harutora, protecting him. But when he had been bound by the Raven's Wing, he hadn't been able to see her, perhaps due to its influence. What's more, Harutora had been in an almost hysteric state then and he hadn't had the leisure to pay attention to Kon's circumstances. Then, he had been captured by the exorcists, his magic had been sealed during

transportation, and he had been tossed into the room from before. He hadn't had an opportunity to speak with his shikigami.

But currently, he could feel Kon's aura nearby. Since Kumomaru was here, it would be very difficult to hold a detailed conversation. Kon probably believed that and wasn't materializing for now.

Then.

...Just wait like that.

Without speaking, he made a suppressive gesture with his palm. Then, as seeming proof of a response, aura swayed slightly under his hand. Harutora faced forward, raising his chin and nodding.

Unlike the Exorcist Bureau, it seemed that there were almost no workers in the Onmyou Agency at this time. Kumomaru silently led the way, his footsteps not making noise even in the empty corridor. Harutora continued staring at the undefended back exposed to him.

He wasn't carelessly negligent, but he didn't feel particularly guarded either. Thanks to this, communicating with Kon became possible, but was he not anticipating that he would escape from here or sneak away? Or was he confident that he could deal with anything Harutora could do?

But he couldn't even feel anything comparable to Harutora's personal animosity and malice. Even his apology from earlier - though it had made him quite mad - hadn't been empty. It felt like a true apology. Even as Takiko's shikigami, he was completely unlike Yashamaru.

"......Hey."

"What is it?"

"What's Takiko doing now?"

"We gave her medicine and had her sleep, because she lost her composure after she learned that Tsuchimikado Natsume died."

"....."

Even if he understood, Harutora's limbs reflexively stiffened. Even he didn't know how to deal with the multitude of emotions that swirled inside him.

"One thing that I hope you believe is that this outcome definitely wasn't what my master desired - or what we did. I won't say something selfish like 'please forgive me', but my master wanted to become friends with Tsuchimikado Natsume from the bottom of her heart. That's the truth."

"......Because she thought she was Tsuchimikado Yakou's reincarnation?"

"....."

Kumomaru stayed silent to Harutora's question.

But.

"......No, that's wrong. She's just - alone."

It was still inexcusable. Yes, Kumomaru who said it knew this the most - it was that sort of tone.

There were other questions he wanted to ask. But Harutora couldn't bring himself to speak with Kumomaru anymore.

The two of them silently advanced.

They took the elevator, changing floors. The highest floor. The instant he left the elevator, he noticed a faint incongruity.

It was a people-repelling barrier.

...Finally.....

The final destination Kumomaru brought him to was the executive office. Gulp. He couldn't help but swallow.

"Here."

Kumomaru walked straight into the executive office. There was a seat for the secretary in the room ahead. Kumomaru momentarily stopped in front of the door deep inside and knocked on the door. He opened the door and turned to Harutora.

Starting now was the stage where the victor would be decided. Harutora resolved himself again, stepping into the room deep inside.

The room was more spacious than he had imagined.

Interior decorations that gave off a sedate impression. There was a carpet on the floor, and the buildings of Akihabara could be seen through the giant windows on the walls deep inside, eye-catching because of their nighttime illumination.

There seemed to be a sofa and table used for receiving guests. The teenager lounging on the sofa rose along with Harutora's entrance into the room. It was Yashamaru. After seeing Harutora, he grinned as if to say 'sorry for bothering you before'.

Then--

The person sitting in front of the desk also stood up slowly.

He wore a robe, a hakama, and an obi. Formal wear. An Onmyouji's outfit that made him think of Ohtomo when he had confronted Doman. Actually, though it was their first time meeting, Harutora had seen him in professional journals several times. Moreover, he had heard about him from his daughter many times. Just like he had imagined, he was stern and had an atmosphere that made other people nervous even when he was just standing still. Also, he had a strong aura that felt hidden deeply inside him.

Kurahashi Genji.

The head of the famous Kurahashi family and the chief of the Onmyou Agency.

The leader of the Twelve Divine Generals, hailed as the most outstanding modern National First-Class Onmyouji.

Principal Kurahashi Miyo's son - also, Kurahashi Kyouko's father.

...This man is.....

The man at the apex of the modern magic world. The moment he thought that, he felt his hair rise.

"Good to meet you, Tsuchimikado Harutora-kun. I am Kurahashi Genji."

"....."

He had a steely expression. His entire body went stiff for some reason.

But after seeing the speechless Harutora, Kurahashi's expression softened slightly.

"You're unsurprised. You're unshaken, even when you realized you were being brought to the executive office. Or perhaps you vaguely noticed from Princess Souma's words."

His voice held unadorned praise.

But the praise was undeserved. Harutora was extremely shaken, but he didn't let it show. It was because he had already heard his name during his conversation with the spider before.

Needless to say, it had been through the conversation through letters of blood on the window. The information he had heard was only an extremely small, incomplete portion. Everything from then on was unknown territory.

Kurahashi stood up from his chair and walked around to the front of his desk with steady steps.

"You won't ask about my daughter?"

Harutora first took a slow breath.

Then--

"......Don't look down on me."

He replied.

"I don't need to ask in the first place. Kyouko would have told us if she knew anything, even if it was only a little bit."

"......I see."

Kurahashi nodded slightly. Perhaps it was a mistake, but he seemed to be smiling. Then, he stood still in front of the desk and confronted Harutora. In comparison, Yashamaru didn't get any closer, lazily laying back on the sofa as if he were watching a show. Kumomaru was the same, silently moving to Yashamaru's side.

Harutora glared at Kurahashi, grasping their positions with a corner of his vision. He had experienced Yashamaru's skills earlier, and he had understood Kumomaru's strength to some degree because of his spat with Natsume and the others. As for

Kurahashi, he didn't even need to make a detailed comparison. The current him didn't have a chance of victory no matter which one of them was his opponent.

But, even so, his position should be comparable. Because the one they wanted was no other than Harutora himself.

"......So?"

Harutora continued speaking completely unyieldingly.

"Let me confirm this first, can you resurrect Natsume with the Taizan Fukun Ritual?"

"We can."

Affirmation. Harutora lost his keenness because of Kurahashi's matter-of-fact assertion.

"......Is that true?"

"We can do it. Of course, we'll break the law."

"Th, Then would it be the same as Yashamaru over there - would she awaken as Takiko's shikigami, like how Dairenji Shidou awakened as a shikigami?"

Kurahashi didn't reply directly this time after he tossed forth the doubt in his heart. He turned his head slightly in Yashamaru's direction.

Yashamaru spoke as he sat with both hands on the sofa:

"No, it's different."

A mischievous smile emerged on him. Perhaps he had long since expected Harutora to harbor those doubts.

"Though it's all called the Taizan Fukun Ritual, there is a range of types. Strictly speaking, that's a name referring to a whole group of similar magics and rituals."

"What does that mean?"

"In other words, the Taizan Fukun Ritual refers to an overall system of magic - linking with the spiritual entity known as 'Taizan Fukun' and then manipulating human souls."

"System?"

"Yes." Yashamaru nodded with a slight smile at astonished Harutora after he asked back.

"Also, what you can do with the Taizan Fukun Ritual increases dramatically according to your understanding and ability to control that system. The results depend on the usage. For example, though Suzuka was able to use the Taizan Fukun Ritual, all she knew was the method of 'trading her life for the life of a dead human'. If you use the Taizan Fukun Ritual, that kind of thing is 'possible', but it's not 'all there is' by a long shot. Rather, it's just an extremely small part of the system."

"......Really?"

"Of course. Naturally, the Taizan Fukun Ritual isn't all-powerful, you know? ......Ah, no, it's unclear whether 'soul manipulation' might actually be all-powerful, but at least it's hard to do for us. It's like the ruins of a mysterious computer to an ancient civilization. No matter how we analyze and analyze, we can't see the whole picture. Even Tsuchimikado Yakou was probably unable to understand the complete system. We just connect with the 'understood portion' and use its effects."

"....."

Harutora was speechless as he listened carefully to Yashamaru's explanation.

Then, although he was generally clueless, he felt that he understood the reason the Taizan Fukun Ritual was viewed as forbidden magic.

Something that could never be understood and was only used within the range that was understood. There might be a smart method, but it was probably a method that always carried 'danger'. After all, if some abnormality happened in the system, there would be no way to deal with it. In addition, it was extremely possible for a problem in the 'still-unknown range' to affect the 'known range'.

Even though they spoke of the 'known range', since they couldn't understand the complete system, then it wouldn't be too much to call it the 'range that they believed to be known'. The Taizan Fukun Ritual was far more of an ambiguous and undefined magic than Harutora imagined.

...That's right, because actually.....

Yakou had failed.

No, more accurately, maybe 'reincarnating' already counted as a success, but in comparison, he had brought about huge spiritual disasters. Spiritual disasters continued happening in Tokyo until this day because of the Taizan Fukun Ritual that Yakou misused. Such a dangerous magic couldn't possibly be left unregulated.

However--

".....Aah, right, right, there's something I especially need to tell you--"

Yashamaru smiled as if reading Harutora's thoughts. A strange light came from the eyes beneath his monocle.

"What Yakou failed at wasn't the Taizan Fukun Ritual."

A surprise. It was like the monologue in his mind had suddenly been intruded upon.

"...Eh?"

"Because, you see, Yakou reincarnated properly."

He somewhat understood the meaning in Yashamaru's words. Indeed. If he was truly Yakou, that meant that Yakou hadn't failed at all. But, then what had caused the huge spiritual disasters?

"......I, I see, it's because Yakou didn't pay the 'price' of the ritual....."

"And hence the great spiritual disasters happened? Is that something Suzuka told you? What a joke! How could Yakou make that kind of low-level mistake? Obtaining lives was a trivial task back then, especially since there were plenty of people who wanted to dedicate their lives to Yakou."

"Th-Then....."

Why? Yashamaru spoke with a light tone to the staring Harutora.

"Think about it. If it were just a human controlling a magic involving a single soul, do you think it would lead to those kinds of devastating spiritual disasters? It's very unnatural, right?"

"But, there really were huge spiritual disasters in Tokyo--"

"Yeah, because what Yakou failed wasn't the Taizan Fukun Ritual, but the system above it."

"Wha--"

...What?

Harutora couldn't speak.

But, at the same time, he felt something flit through his mind.

An extremely ominous, but unsullied thought. Ideas. Faith. Something sleeping deep inside Harutora that he didn't know of.

A chill ran through him.

"......Yashamaru."

Kurahashi exhorted dully. Yashamaru shrugged comically.

"Ah, whatever. ...Anyway, Harutora-kun. In regard to Tsuchimikado Natsume's resurrection, it's just as promised. Leave it to us. Of course, it depends on your attitude."

Yashamaru ended his long explanation with those completely deliberate words. Harutora bit his lip.

...Damn. What exactly is the situation.....

The continuous, unanticipated information that he had been told in torrents practically obscured the important facts. But, he couldn't sincerely trust what they said about Natsume.

"......Depends on my attitude, huh....."

The words of a cheap villain. He had never thought the day would come when he actually heard those sort of words.

Harutora stared straight at Kurahashi again. Wiping the previous conversation out of his head for now, he focused on the negotiations that were to follow.

"......Could you 'explain' to me a bit?"

"Of course."

He didn't know how far Kurahashi had seen through his bluff, but Kurahashi didn't mind his arrogant manner of speech and agreed straightforwardly.

"We hope to join hands with you. You've already heard everything from the Souma princess. We would like to invite you as a 'comrade'."

"......You're inviting Tsuchimikado Yakou, not me, right?"

"No, it's 'you', Tsuchimikado Harutora-kun. Though we see you as Tsuchimikado Yakou's reincarnation, the way we think won't change even if you aren't Yakou."

"Liar."

"It's not a lie. Naturally. Because to me, you're the next head of the family."

"...!"

He was taken aback. Too many things had happened, and he had forgotten about that for a moment.

But come to think of it, Takiko had certainly pronounced that Harutora was a main family member and Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi's son. Tsuchimikado Harutora's position would change greatly, not purely because of the possibility that he was Yakou's reincarnation.

...Calm down..... I have to calm down.

He couldn't do anything if he wasn’t calm. He had to think and act objectively and calmly.

".....In any case, why do you want someone like me? Indeed, I might be Yakou's reincarnation, but I don't have any memories of my previous life at all, nor am I a genius like Yakou. Or do you think that I'll become like Yakou in the future? That I'll become an incredible Onmyouji like Yakou?"

When Yashamaru had appeared before Harutora, he had asked about his 'former' strength and memories. Judging by that, would he become Yakou in the future? If that were true, then what would become of 'Tsuchimikado Harutora' at that time?

"First, what do you want to do by making Yakou into one of your own? Y, You're the chief of the Onmyou Agency! You're already at the top of the Onmyouji, isn't that enough? Tell me what else you want to do!"

Their 'goal'. That was something the spider also wanted to know. He didn't believe that it was a crazed desire like the so-called Yakou believers. It was unreasonable to view the 'enemies' arranged before him as pure lunatics. Being unable to see their goal was like being unable to see their true appearance.

He was driven to indecision by his anxiety, but he resisted on the surface. The actions of an arrogant 'brat' who truly didn't know anything.

They probably weren't acting, but they weren't reacting truthfully either. But in any case, the more they viewed him as unskilled and immature, the more openings that would make, and the opportunities would gradually increase - hopefully. No matter how it was acquired, information was information.

"Did you know?" Then, Kurahashi abruptly opened his mouth as he stared at Harutora desperately trying to stand his ground.

"During the Pacific War, Tsuchimikado Yakou headed the rebuilt Onmyou Bureau and merged all Japanese systems of magic to establish a new system of magic. An extremely powerful, extremely practical and useful magic from which religion was removed. That was the Imperial Onmyoudou that became the foundation of today's General Onmyoudou. ...However, it wasn't something made by Yakou's achievements alone."

"Eh?"

Kurahashi continued impassionately speaking in response to the sudden widening of Harutora's eyes.

"That's natural. You also learned a bit about the greatness of magic at the Onmyou Academy. Yakou didn't limit himself to Onmyoudou, he even roped in other sects of magic. Most of them were techniques that were already lost at the time or techniques that were disappearing. Moreover, they were techniques with jumbled

and unclear authenticity. He had to completely investigate, select, and add them to build the system of magic. It wasn't an amount of work that could be realized by a single person."

"....."

"Of course, it was an undertaking only possible because of Yakou's ability. I have no plans on belittling his greatness. But the achievements Yakou left behind were only completed because of the work of the nation and the military's strength behind the scenes."

Kurahashi narrowed his eyes.

Boiling heat could be glimpsed deep within his sharp, profound eyes, on the other side of his steely impression.

"And..... The people who acted as his left and right hands were the Tsuchimikado family's most powerful branch family, the Kurahashi family, along with the Souma family that had influence deep within the Imperial Army's higher-ups."

"Souma....."

Harutora, finally comprehended, moved his gaze from Kurahashi to Yashamaru. Yashamaru smiled unreservedly, welcoming his friend's introduction.

"As Kurahashi says, if Hishamaru and Kakugyouki were the left and right hands of the 'Onmyouji' Tsuchimikado Yakou, then the left and right hands of him as the Onmyou Bureau Chief - the 'Onmyou Head' Tsuchimikado Yakou were the Kurahashi family and the Souma family."

Harutora stared at Yashamaru in disbelief, then he returned his gaze to Kurahashi.

...Yakou's left and right hands.....

Until now, Harutora had only had the impression that Yakou was an extraordinary practitioner. For example, a genius superior to 'strong Onmyouji' like Kagami Reiji, Ohtomo, or Kogure. He had believed him to be a legendary Onmyouji who controlled powerful magics and shikigami.

But, on the other hand, he was also the head of the Tsuchimikado family, as well as the executive responsible for the Onmyou Bureau organization, a position where he was in command of a large number of people and supported by many comrades.

He wasn't alone.

He had been accompanied by people of the same age who possessed the same will.

"...In the past, the king of the magic world 'Tsuchimikado' led the 'Kurahashi' and 'Souma', reviving the 'Magic' that was facing the crisis of destruction. Then, the next 'great development' that they pursued..... wasn't realized. That is all."

Kurahashi continued speaking. Harutora was absorbed by his words.

"However, the will of the 'Tsuchimikado' was send through time by Yakou's reincarnation, and was continually inherited by my bloodline. All the way until now."

Thump. Harutora's heart beat.

It wasn't Onmyoudou. Nor was it an illusion or first-class spirit language.

But there was indeed a 'curse' in Kurahashi's words. A 'curse' woven to carry distant history. A 'curse' that would send the thoughts of the ancients, the desires of the dead, and communicate them to the living descendants.

A 'curse' from the ancient dark underbelly of Onmyoudou.

"Tsuchimikado Harutora."

Kurahashi chanted Harutora's name, saying:

"The 'Kurahashi' and the 'Souma' now crown the 'Tsuchimikado' as king again, inheriting Yakou's legacy. We ask for your assistance. I wish for you to walk the path of Onmyoudou with us."

He instinctively understood.

The 'Kurahashi' he spoke of didn't refer to Kurahashi Genji alone. Kurahashi Genji was just of the 'Kurahashi family' - part of the huger, more ancient, and more powerful 'Kurahashi'.

Then, what he spoke to and requested assistance of wasn't Harutora alone.

The 'Tsuchimikado'.

He tried to reach out to the 'King' of the nation's magical world that spanned a thousand years.

Harutora stopped breathing, frozen in place.

His mind was paralyzed. His heart was overwhelmed and impressed on a scale that he had never experienced.

But--

On the other hand, he suddenly noticed. A thought that was completely different.

...I see.

"That's why--"

"What?"

"That's why I was raised in the branch family."

Kurahashi showed uncertainty for the first time because of those simple words that he let out.

His current self. His sixteen-year-old self that had gotten by without doubting anything.

Harutora had finally noticed several hours ago that he was actually at the center of a long-running 'conspiracy'. But it was unclear whether that 'conspiracy' was purely to fool the eyes of the 'enemies'. Maybe there were completely different reasons, reasons of a more intimate and personal nature.

The faces of his parents emerged in his heart.

Takahiro's face. Chizuru's face.

And the face of Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi.

It wasn't fully formed, as it was just a vague, general understanding, but--

They had tried to protect Harutora 'in various ways'.

Just then--

"...Kurahashi."

Yashamaru said.

Glancing back, Yashamaru had stood up from the sofa at some time. Kumomaru next to him also wore a collected expression.

Maybe Kurahashi had also realized, as the uncertainty from before instantly vanished from. Eh? When Harutora thought this, the phone on the desk rang ominously.

An ice-cold smile emerged on Yashamaru's face as he said:

"We have guests."

Part 4

It was like this again.

An order to conceal the truth. These orders had been strangely numerous recently. She was extremely displeased and was also somewhat uneasy.

"What exactly do they want me to do?"

Independent Exorcist Yuge Mari finally complained, taking advantage of the fact that no one was around.

That order came from the Director - Miyachi. While she had been on duty at the Shinjuku branch, she had suddenly gotten a phone call saying to 'come to the main agency immediately'. She had rushed over thinking there was some emergency, but then she had been told 'wait there'. It had already been an hour since then. Miyachi, the key to this, hadn't showed up at all, and she couldn't even reach him by phone. She had long since passed from anger to boredom.

"Honestly, with the Tsuchimikado family incident the other day, enough is enough. I haven't even returned home since then."

Yuge was inside the Onmyou Agency building, in an office of the Exorcist Bureau. Like its name, it was a room that the Exorcist Bureau employees used when they worked during the day.

Naturally, there was no one in this room when the Onmyou Agency wasn't operating. Yuge, whose personality was basically earnest and who everyone else believed to be a model employee, couldn't help but become flippant. Especially when her colleague Kagami Reiji had been placed in confinement, as the Independent Exorcists were busy even before that. She was honestly very unhappy to be tossed around for orders that she didn't comprehend.

Yuge was currently twenty-four. She kept her mid-length hair up with a barrette, matching her makeup with a tight skirt and a jacket. Other than the fact that her jacket was miasma protection clothing whose length had been modified, she looked at first glance to be no different from a commonplace office lady.

However, though she was female, she was one of the youngest National First-Class Onmyouji to obtain 'First-Class Onmyou' qualifications. She was a capable Onmyouji who could even rank in the top ten in the nation. She was a bit proud of her own ability and took pride in her work. She seriously believed that her fate was to protect people from spiritual disasters.

But because of this, she preferred to avoid factional jousting within the agency. The Tsuchimikado incident a few days ago was clearly involved with 'politics'. Though Yuge very much wanted to keep her distance from such things, it seemed that her boss Miyachi wasn't outside its reach.

".....Though there are things that can't be helped in his position..... At least explain things a bit when you involve your subordinate. That useless boss....."

Her habit of muttering when she got angry was a habit that had started when she was small as well as something that she hid and felt embarrassed about. She would remind herself to be careful when there were people around, but she would do it without thinking when that wasn't the case. Yuge sulked, pouting her cheeks.

Yuge was a capable Onmyouji who could rank among the top ten in the nation. But as Yuge saw it, only Miyachi was special. Though she would die before revealing it now, he had been her role model when she had strived to become a professional. She respected her senpai Kogure and recognized the ability of her kouhai Kagami, but no matter what, Miyachi was the only one who was greatly different. She practically felt that he wasn't human. As one of the Twelve Divine Generals, the 'Binding Princess' couldn't help but reach this conclusion.

In terms of ability, she straightforwardly believed him to be a 'god'.

But why did he have to be 'like that' in terms of personality?

It wasn't right - she couldn't say that much. But it didn't match. If his normal attitude were like Chief Kurahashi's, maybe she would be able to reconcile with it.

"......Come to think of it, at least pick up your phone, honestly....."

Yuge frowned impatiently, staring at the screen of her phone. Incidentally, the number of her boss that had been entered under his full name at first had now become the word 'Beardy'. But having her call history filled with 'Beardy' during a busy time was another source of irritation.

However, the time she had been able to briefly relax ended here.

"......Eh?"

It seemed as if the chair she sat on had suddenly been kicked flying.

A strong feeling of incongruity. Moreover, some kind of wail rang out immediately after she became conscious of that abnormal aura and magical energy.

Her trained body reflexively ran out of the room. She ran into the corridor - and stopped at the nearest window.

Her eyes couldn't help but widen. Chills ran through her whole body because of the scene outside the window.

A rampage of demons and monsters.

"Wha!?"

Shikigami. Simple shikigami. A group of countless simple shikigami. They seemed on the outside to be shikigami who had jumped out of an ink painting, and completely covered the window exterior - the outer wall of the agency building.

Moreover, she remembered these shikigami.

"'D'!?"

The mysterious Onmyouji 'D' who called himself Ashiya Doman and whose true identity was unknown. The shikigami currently surrounding the outside were the shikigami of 'D' who had 'simultaneously' attacked the Onmyou Agency and Onmyou Academy last month.

The Onmyouji 'D' had ended up being reported to be an ara-mitama - a type of spiritual disaster.

But--

"Why? Didn't Kogure-senpai already purify him!?"

Even though she was extremely confused, Yuge ran through the corridor with all her might.

The wails that rang out increased drastically. In the attack last month, 'D' had announced himself beforehand, and the Onmyou Agency had gathered to engage him in full force. But this time it was a surprise attack. They had no preparations. Though the agency building was permanently protected by a barrier, she didn't know how long it would hold for if this went on.

No, because of that--

"That's why he told me to come.....!?"

Could it be that Miyachi had anticipated that 'D' would attack? It was unclear. But either way, she ran. Her destination was the entrance to the agency building. During the attack last month, 'D' had appeared at the Onmyou Academy, not the Onmyou Agency. She heard that he had broken in straight through the front back then. Of

course, there was no guarantee that he would take the same actions this time, but she could get the whole picture of the attack from the outside.

"Ah, Y-Yuge-san!"

"It's the same as last month--!?"

"Calm down! Please take cover inside the barriers in each room. The Exorcist Bureau should have been contacted, assistance will come to headquarters very quickly!"

The agency members who were unlucky enough to still be in the agency building at this time ran into the corridor to plead for the Divine General's help as if grasping at straws. The people working at the Onmyou Agency weren't all Onmyouji, there were also normal people who hadn't obtained qualifications. There were more of these in the agency building than in the Exorcist Bureau.

But although she felt regretful, she didn't have the leisure to take care of each and every person right now. Because she didn't know how many agency members were left. In a state where they hadn't made any preparations for engagement at all, she who controlled the barrier had an extremely heavy burden.

But.

When Yuge ran panting out to the agency building main entrance, a strong magical energy exploded from behind her back - from somewhere inside the agency building. Then, magical energy shot out like arrows in all directions.

...From inside!? Who was it?

When she stopped in surprise, the magic passed through the walls, ground, and ceiling, even flying to where Yuge was.

She immediately put up a barrier to defend against the strike. But other than the magic that flew straight at her, the others passed by Yuge and flew towards the main entrance.

Not long after she wondered what magic it was, the attack swiftly attached itself to the magic of the barrier and began to attack the barrier.

...It was..... trying to break the barrier!

This was bad - it was already too late by the time she thought that. The loud sound of breaking glass rang out from behind her back. When she turned to look, the main entrance had already been broken and the shikigami outside flooded in like an avalanche.

A simple magic. Actually, the magic that Yuge had blocked with the barrier she had immediately put up hadn't been able to penetrate her barrier magic. But though the permanent barrier that covered the agency building was very strong against external interference, it was very weak to interference from the inside. 'D's target had only been the agency building's barrier.

"Damn!"

Yuge formed a hand seal without regard for the swarming group of shikigami.

Boom. The ground vibrated as if it were shaking. The heavy-duty barrier Yuge put up blocked the shikigamis' onrush. Though the shikigami tried to use their numerical advantage to forcefully break through, the tough barrier of the 'Binding Princess' wouldn't lose to pure strength. After being squashed into the barrier by their companions that flooded in from behind, several shikigami were crushed and disappeared after their bodies flashed with lag.

But even if she blocked the main entrance, the shikigami could invade from other areas. The broken windows. Vents. Before she noticed it, there were presences deep

inside the corridor she had just run through. In the first place, Yuge was held up here and could do nothing.

...Then.

Yuge reached for her charm box, sprinkling charms in three directions. Five charms of different kinds in each direction. She breathed sharply, focusing her consciousness and refining magical energy. She released the barrier she had just put up and changed an incantation in a single breath.

"God of the east sea, Amei. God of the west sea, Shukuryou. God of the south sea, Kyojou. God of the north sea, Gukyou. Gods of the four seas, fend off a hundred demons and drive back the fierce disaster. Order!"

The charms she threw in the three directions traced out a pentagram of light in midair. A spiritual disaster-repelling magical wall from Imperial Onmyoudou. She put up three at the same time.

It was originally used as a magic to repel spiritual disasters, not shikigami. But the master of these shikigami was an ara-mitama - a spiritual disaster - and so they moved with the magical energy of a spiritual disaster. It was actually effective. The swarming shikigami wailed and retreated, fleeing back outside the agency building. In that opening, Yuge overwrote the magic of the repelling magical wall.

Even though it was magic of Imperial Onmyoudou, her specialty was in the area of barriers. She moved the pentagram magical walls that were fixed in midair, setting them around herself in three different directions. Then, she ran to the destroyed entrance. The magical walls became shields that protected their master, following her movements.

Outside.

In front of the agency building entrance was a roundabout connected to the road. It was surrounded by large buildings, and behind it towered the Onmyou Agency building. Night had fallen long ago, and the surroundings were illuminated by outside light.

Right after she ran outside, the evil air mixed with magical energy that filled the summer night sky hit her in the face. A huge group of shikigami as far as the eye could see. The shikigami made grating laughs of 'gigigi'.

Like a nightmare.

"Heh."

In the center of the roundabout in front of her stood 'D'. "A child!?" She doubted her eyes, unable to help but exclaim. This ominous and intense aura. It was him. At least, the master controlling this group of shikigami had to be the one with this young, boyish appearance.

"Are you 'D'?"

"Hmph, with that aura, you must be one of the Twelve Divine Generals? ...Indeed."

The boy admitted readily. Yuge took a step, confronting 'D' in front of the Onmyou Agency building.

Thanks to the three repelling magical walls that she commanded, the shikigami kept a distance from Yuge and didn't approach. Only the boyish 'D' stayed in front of Yuge.

However, her legs were shaking.

An ara-mitama. According to General Onmyoudou, a mobile spiritual disaster - a Phase Three.

But the actual difference was visible at a glance. 'This' wasn't anything simple like that. It was completely different. It was something else that could easily dominate her National First-Class Onmyouji self. How exactly had Kogure purified this kind of fearsome thing?

"What's wrong? Will you do something?" The boy smiled impertinently at the petrified Yuge.

The boy dragged a suitcase behind him. Its cover opened by itself, and a group of simple shikigami flew out from inside it, pouring forth in a huge wave.

"Ugh!?"

Though she tried to immediately block them off with her barrier, she was unable to. She was overwhelmed by terror of 'D' and had trouble acting. Because of the repelling magical walls that protected her, the shikigami were unable to approach Yuge. But they went around Yuge and headed for the agency building.

She 'looked' at the situation in the agency building behind her back without moving her gaze from 'D'. There were various holes opened up in the agency building's permanent barrier because of the barrier destruction magic from the inside. But on the other hand, it wasn't completely destroyed. Inside the Onmyou Agency building were countless stairs, rooms, desks, shelves, and drawers that were enchanted with individual barriers. Those had probably happened to block the scattering magic like Yuge's simple barrier just now.

Even so, although it wasn't completely destroyed, the value of the permanent barrier was cut in half when a part of it was destroyed. It wasn't just the entrance. 'D's shikigami had probably invaded through other holes and were rampaging through the agency building.

...This was bad. At this rate.....!

As she thought of the faces of the agency members she had left behind her, Yuge was quickly crushed by despair.

Just then.

Her phone rang.

A phone call on the battlefield. Needless to say, she usually would have ignored it. But only this moment was different. Not long after her rationality made a decision, she picked up the phone, instinctively seeking for assistance.

"Ah--, Maririn, are you here?"

An extremely maddening voice that symbolized unfairness and discontent to Yuge came from the other side of the phone. "Yes!" Though she replied this, her voice was already one step away from a sob.

"Strengthen the agency building's barrier. To the max."

She immediately complied.

Her fingers formed a seal almost by themselves. She dropped the phone to the ground without even looking, focusing her consciousness behind her back on the magic of the agency building's permanent barrier. The three repelling magical walls protecting her vanished as she refined her magical energy with all her power.

"Om shurimari mamarimari shushuri sowaka!"

She chanted the mantra of Ucchusma. An astonishing force purified and strengthened the agency building's barrier. Even among the National First-Class Onmyouji, only the barrier specialist 'Binding Princess' could instantly strengthen a permanent barrier to such a level alone.

Then, right after Yuge strengthened the barrier.

An indescribable magical energy, perhaps even enough to overcome the 'D' before her, roared out.

Flame.

If 'D's magical energy was turbid shikigami, then this magical energy was a sea of flame. The agency building was instantly immersed in a sea of flame. It wasn't a joke. In front of Yuge's inadvertently-turned head casually unfolded a scene that she couldn't believe was of this world. The barrier she had been instructed to strengthen instantly faltered and groaned under the giant burden.

The countless shikigami on the outside wall of the agency building were incinerated.

Swept away.

Then, after the scenery became a burning hell, the flame vanished without a trace. All that was left were the traces of a huge magical energy. Just that much was already stifling.

"Kah."

The boy laughed happily.

"How very surprising. Though I heard rumors long before, I didn't think it would be this 'gorgeous'. I don't need to confirm anymore - you're 'Enma', correct?"

She couldn't help but follow the boy's gaze.

In front of it was a diminutive, bearded middle-aged man who had readily burdened her with heavy overtime - how maddening - walking closer with a slow pace - why don't you run, at least?

Since her boss was the same as always even at this kind of time, she was surrounded by anxiety as well as a sense of relief to accompany it. But he wasn't 'completely' the same as always. His outfit was different. What Miyachi wore wasn't his normal

old suit. It was a kasaya, a full-body vestment. It was an outfit that Yuge was seeing for the first time.

"...Yeah."

No strength could be sensed from the voice that Miyachi replied to 'D's question with.

"Nice to meet you, Priest. I am Onmyouji Miyachi Iwao."

After he said this, Miyachi walked in front of 'D', bowing his head deeply. In comparison, 'D' laughed delightedly.

"My oh my, you already saw through that man's plans."

"No, I wish that were the case..... To be honest, this is quite troublesome. I didn't think 'Shadow' would bring you along too. What kind of magic did that guy use?"

"Hohoho, to tell the truth, that man and I are 'texting buddies'."

"For real? If that's enough to obtain your assistance, then please trade numbers with me, Priest."

"No problem, no problem. You're quite welcome. .....However, it's not cheap, you know?"

'D' bared his teeth in a grin. These two unimaginable monsters were having a stupid conversation before her eyes. Yuge had already given up on thinking as she witnessed this scene.

Right now, she could only--

"Director.....!"

"Haha. Sorry for contacting you late, Maririn. I'll leave the interior of the agency building to you - alright?"

"...Understood. But, please don't call me Maririn!"

...How fast.

Doman's shikigami that had surrounded the outside had been incinerated by magic. Ohtomo couldn't help but click his tongue.

The shikigami that had invaded the agency building were alive, but their numbers were lacking to be an actual distraction. More importantly, the Doman he had expected to take the initiative had been 'suppressed'. Though that was inside his predictions for now, it was the worst scenario. 'Enma' Miyachi had gone to the frontlines.

".....The enemies aren't simple."

Ohtomo had already infiltrated the interior of the Onmyou Agency. His plans were for Doman to make a feint and for Ohtomo to find a way to save Harutora. But the Onmyou Agency had responded quickly to that strategy. It looked like the opponents had also expected someone to 'take back Harutora' tonight.

But things were still even. Though his trump card Doman had been suppressed, he had successfully suppressed the opponent's trump card Miyachi. Then all he needed to do was move and complete his goal in this rigid situation.

The screams of agency members resounded through the interior of the agency building. It seemed that there were still people who hadn't taken refuge, but there weren't many people left behind in the first place. They were in a panic and didn't have enough people. The chaos would eventually subside, so he had to be fast.

...Where is he?

Ohtomo cast stealth magic on himself, searching for clues of Harutora's location.

Doman's simple shikigami that had been dispatched into the agency building had additional functions that searched for Harutora's aura. Thump, thump. His fake leg made noise as he walked through the corridor, and he slowly went deeper into the agency building while gathering information like cotton absorbing water. Even if he didn't do this, the Onmyou Agency was a labyrinth. An incomprehensible maze that had been constructed without reason, and with many barriers of varying sizes. He sharpened all his nerves, swiftly passing through.

To be honest, he couldn't deny that he was anxious.

But even so, it was clearly Ohtomo's mistake for only noticing that 'that presence', cloaked with just a simple stealth magic, when it was right in front of him.

"I never ever imagined this moment."

He instantly put up a barrier, deflecting the first attack. But what flew at him were two simple shikigami mimicking knives. After the first attack was deflected, the other knife followed right behind it. Fast. He retreated, dragging his fake leg. Then, he slashed with his cane, and by the time he managed to dodge the next attack of the first one, the presence had already vanished. Though he didn't let him past, the distance had been shortened.

He clicked his tongue again. Honestly, this kouhai always made him restless.

The practitioner's figure appeared. Before that, Ohtomo jabbed his cane on the floor with a 'thunk'. Right afterwards, a curse in the form of a shark head showed its teeth and lunged out from under the running practitioner's feet, but--

"हुं!"

He dodged while chanting Kundali Vidyaraja's seed syllable mantra, crushing the curse.

He landed in the corridor, across from Ohtomo.

He wasn't in the mood for frivolous words.

"Get out of the way!"

He spat coldly, but unfortunately, it just made the opponent happy.

"Hey, hey, how cold, 'Senpai'."

A bloodthirsty, fierce smile emerged on Kagami's face along with his incredibly happy tone. He made the many rings on his fingers jingle as if showing off.

"I even came out at midnight for this. I'm letting the Director deal with that old man. You should at least be my opponent."

The group of shikigami attacked before Touji, Kyouko, and Suzuka slipped into the agency building.

When the three of them circled around to the back in order to sneak in through the side door, shikigami suddenly swarmed forth. Moreover, they had seen these shikigami before. They couldn't possibly forget. They were the same as the ones that had attacked the Onmyou Academy last month - the group of shikigami that Doman controlled.

After the shikigami completely covered the agency building - that was also the same as the attack last month - the agency building's barrier was broken from the inside. The shikigami mercilessly invaded the agency building interior. It made them wonder whether it was too cruel, but--

Not long afterwards, they were suddenly incinerated.

After the shikigami attacked, the three of them kept their distance from the agency building and hid in a panic. Even so, things probably wouldn't have been so simple

if Suzuka hadn't reflexively put up a barrier. An abnormal heat and impact like a raging storm. It was like a scene from a Hollywood war film.

Magic. Someone had used magic to wipe out Doman's shikigami.

But could that truly be called 'magic'? It was greatly different from the 'magic' that they knew. It was practically a natural disaster.

"......It looks like the agency we're breaking into isn't like usual....."

Touji straightforwardly expressed his feelings with an expression that could only smile now. Kyouko was dumbstruck as she stared at the continuing magical battle.

Suzuka, sweating coldly, said:

"What do we do? We didn't plan for Ashiya Doman to show up at all..... And the Onmyou Agency seems to be prepared. It seems like the inside of the agency building might become a battlefield....."

"A battlefield, huh..... Well, that's not too convenient."

Touji stayed resolute as he answered Suzuka's question.

"Like this, all we can do is take advantage of the chaos and charge in. While the Onmyou Agency's attention is on Doman, let's hurry up and bring that idiot Harutora back."

A battle plan that didn't resemble one at all. He had long since been prepared to face whatever happened, and maybe being inflexible might work here.

There seemed to be quite an amount of Doman's shikigami still left inside the agency building. They were 'enemies', but also the 'enemy of their enemy'.

"We can't choose our circumstances either. So let's just make complete use of them."

"Hah, how unappealing..... But, it might be as you say. Let's get this over with."

Suzuka seemed to have made her decision, and Touji nodded vigorously.

"Alright, let's go."

"Wait."

It was Kyouko who called for them to stop. Touji turned to look, but Kyouko stared at the agency building instead of him.

She seemed unsettled - but with an expression as if something had captivated her. "Kyouko?" Touji asked doubtfully.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"....."

Kyouko didn't respond. She bit her lip, with an expression as if something had driven her into a corner.

Then--

"...! It's started!"

Suzuka cried out shrilly and Touji also instantly noticed. Across from them in the direction of the agency building main entrance, astounding magical energies were beginning to rise.

One side had to be Doman. And just like before, there was fire. This time it didn't pour over to this side of the agency building, but it roared powerfully, creating turbulence. Even with the agency building between them, the wind it whipped up still blew Touji and the others' hair into messes.

".....Thank god we went around to the back....."

The shooting flame highlighted the edge of the agency building. It was as if there was a giant monster running wild on the other side of the structure - actually, that

might actually be quite 'accurate'. It easily trumped the magical battle between Doman and Ohtomo on a sense of scale.

"Damn. The Exorcist Bureau headquarters will send people quickly for this kind of commotion. Let's hurry--"

"Wait."

It was Kyouko who stopped them again. Suzuka's expression became astonished because of her firm tone, and Touji lost his momentum again.

Kyouko was still looking in the direction of the agency building. She had the same expression they had seen just now - no, she conveyed an even more conscientious atmosphere.

Touji was perplexed.

"What is it? What's with you since a while ago?"

But when Kyouko was asked this, she suddenly became downhearted. "I don't understand." She replied.

"Even I don't get it. But....."

"Kyouko. .....I understand. You wait here. Leave the rest to me and Suzuka--"

"No! That's not it. Although I'm scared - although my legs have been shaking since before, that's not it! Please, wait....."

She stubbornly said.

Touji questioned Suzuka with his gaze, looking troubled. But naturally, even Suzuka was confused about Kyouko's attitude. Moreover, unfortunately, the fact that Kyouko herself was the most confused was conveyed to Touji and Suzuka.

On the other hand, Kyouko ended up squeezing her eyes shut.

She desperately focused her mind. But who know what she wanted to do. She feared that even she herself didn't know. The impatient Touji prepared to say something again, but Suzuka wordlessly stopped him.

"Suzuka."

"....."

Confusion was written on Suzuka's face. If she were asked why she had stopped him, she would have to answer that it was her instincts.

However, those were also the instincts of a National First-Class Onmyouji, the 'Child Prodigy'. Suzuka silently stared at Kyouko, and though Touji was dumbfounded, he ended up forcing himself to be patient at this final moment.

They had been united this far. He could only stay composed. Things would only become bad if he lost his calm at an impasse.

Then - Kyouko slowly opened her eyes, her face still troubled.

Part 5

"...They've come."

After looking out the window of the executive office, Kurahashi picked up the handset and spoke blandly.

In the blink of an eye, a group of shikigami he had previously encountered had climbed up to the highest floor. They had been wiped out in seconds. A blazing flame had casually covered the other side of the window, a glowing wall of flame. A scene lacking reality, as if the outside world had been incinerated.

...What. What was that just now?

Was it magic.....? Harutora had used Five Elements Mutual Generation with a Phase Three before and controlled a powerful fire magic. Harutora's magic had defeated the shikigami Shaver. But how many times greater than the magical energy Harutora had controlled at the time was the magic covering the entire exterior of the window right now? To be honest, he couldn't even imagine.

Then - Harutora turned his gaze from the window to Kurahashi and the others.

They faced powerful magic and such rapid developments, but Kurahashi and Yashamaru didn't seem unsettled at all. Even Kumomaru's expression had stiffened.

"That's all to your report? Understood. Continue watching."

After briefly acknowledging the phone call that had rung before the shikigami attacked, Kurahashi returned the handset back to its original position in a businesslike manner.

He turned his head towards Yashamaru, speaking without any concern of Harutora's presence:

"Miyachi is holding Domahoshi back at the agency building main entrance. Yuge has gone to deal with the shikigami that invaded the agency building. And Kagami. He has confirmed contact with 'Shadow' and has entered battle."

"Hmph, then rather than saying the Priest is here purely for revenge....."

"We should view him as being on 'Shadow's' side. To be honest, it's very unexpected."

Kurahashi coldly conveyed the circumstances with a no-nonsense tone. Harutora's eyes widened and he went speechless upon hearing this.

...'Shadow'? He remembered that that was.....!

That had been Ohtomo's nickname when he had been a Mystical Investigator. Moreover, as he thought, the group of shikigami from just now had been Doman's shikigami.

But.

...Sensei's here? And Doman's on Sensei's side.....!?

That meant that the attack was a 'combined effort' of Ohtomo and Doman? How could there be such an absurd thing? Because the two of them should have formed a hostile relationship when they fought to the death in the Onmyou Agency last month. How could the two of them have joined hands to attack the Onmyou Agency?

But in contrast to the stunned Harutora, Kurahashi was calm throughout.

"Yashamaru. Domahoshi was outside our expectations. For now, Miyachi is unavailable. Maybe I should have you go out."

"Okay. If 'those three' come, then Kumomaru and I will go engage them. But - you know, there hasn't been a single sign at all yet, so it feels like they won't be coming anymore. At least not tonight."

"I hope not. Anyway, exorcist teams will be moving from the Exorcist Bureau headquarters soon. After that it's just a matter of time."

Grasping the situation and emotionlessly responding without hesitation. An 'unshakability' only possessed by someone who anticipated every situation and who was as steady as a rock. Moreover, his courage was reinforced by the various experiences and the 'self-confidence' they had formed, while also proving the 'dignity' of his self-confidence.

"......Chief, I....."

"Hmm? Ahh, right. Though only the agency building is involved in the commotion, why don't you go to the princess just in case."

Yashamaru readily approved Kumomaru's request. They were so calm and resourceful.

After Kumomaru obtained permission, he immediately dematerialized and vanished. Though this meant there was one less person - he didn't feel that the situation had become any better. Rather, that just made him feel how 'insufficient he was and how large the disparity between the two sides was.

"We've changed the topic."

Kurahashi returned his gaze to Harutora, speaking as if nothing had happened at all.

"It seems like you already know who 'Shadow' is. Then, you should be able to imagine why he appeared now."

It was as Kurahashi said. Though he was surprised that Ohtomo had appeared together with Doman, he could imagine the reason he had come. It was none other than Harutora himself.

Ohtomo had learned about Takiko from Harutora and the others this evening - rather, it already counted as yesterday by now. He probably held suspicions that the Onmyou Agency had orchestrated the fire at the Tsuchimikado main family's residence.

More importantly, he had already heard of Natsume's death. At the same time, the probability that Harutora was Yakou's reincarnation was very high. If he knew that Harutora had been taken away by the Onmyou Agency, it wouldn't be unthinkable for him to act to free him. Though Ohtomo was easygoing and liked acting leisurely, he was a man who had risked himself to protect the students against Doman.

But he wouldn't have thought Ohtomo would take things this far.

...No, wait. That was wrong. That wasn't it.

Had he still not understood after seeing Kurahashi and the others? Even this wasn't enough. With the Onmyou Agency as an opponent, this was a matter of course.

"Let me first say that it's not just your homeroom teacher who wants to take you back."

"Wh-What?"

"It was reported that they've vanished. They laid a trap, as was expected. It seems that your 'friends' will soon be here."

"What."

...Why?

Harutora's expression twisted and he clenched his fists. The expresssion he glared at Kurahashi almost spat fire, but the Onmyou Agency Chief didn't concern himself over a boy's gaze.

"They really care for their friends."

His demeanor had no sarcasm or any praise as he evaluated them with a voice devoid of emotion.

...Those guys.....!

Several emotions that didn't become words pressed down on Harutora's heart. Though he was happy, anxiety and terror were far above that. The agency building was turning into a battlefield right now. Moreover, there was an 'enemy'. His companions were preparing to enter a battlefield completely dominated by a powerful enemy and were unaware that they had been noticed.

First, the fact that 'it was reported' this late at night proved that Kurahashi and the others had to still be paying attention to the students' movements. Indeed, Yashamaru had said that he had interest in Touji, and Suzuka was one of the Twelve Divine Generals. They were indeed powerful - but even so, they were insignificant factors on this battlefield. To Kurahashi and the others, they were opponents that could be dealt with however they wished.

However, they didn't spare any effort. They made sure not to miss anything. That meant that the male dorm that Harutora and the others had been in today had also been monitored. But it was unclear whether only he and the others had been monitored. And when exactly had it started? How long had he and the others been under Kurahashi's surveillance?

Harutora and the others had already lost before the battle. They had lost to their opponent’s extensive planning and preparations before the battle even started.

...And..... also.....

Harutora's gaze inadvertently fell to his feet.

His friends' feelings made him happy.

But--

"I think you understand as well, but let me put it straight. Your teacher and friends won't agree with you using forbidden magic to resurrect Tsuchimikado Natsume."

Kurahashi spoke first. Harutora couldn't refute him.

Yashamaru nodded pretentiously and said:

"Harutora-kun, if you want to awaken Tsuchimikado Natsume - only we who do not fear taboos can help you."

He didn't want to admit it, but he was right. To resurrect Natsume. Harutora's heart was already firmly set on that. Even if it was taboo, even if he traded his own life, he would resurrect Natsume.

Then, his only realistic option were the two before him now. The answer was clear already.

"Tsuchimikado Harutora."

Kurahashi pronounced heavily. Harutora raised his head, staring straight into his eyes.

"I must admit that there are some misunderstandings left between us, and that we lack understanding. I will give up on simple guarantees like being able to resolve those in the future. Because no one knows what will happen in the future."

Unexpected words. The way he spoke as if he were releasing Harutora was unexpected, and the final words were outside of his predictions. Even Kurahashi who understood and controlled everything admitted that he 'didn't know what would happen in the future' to someone immature like Harutora.

Those words probably held something other than seriousness. But at the same time, they also expressed his sincerity.

But - Kurahashi continued speaking.

"Though we cannot see the future, we have to walk forward through the darkness. Though we do not know the correct answer, we must continue making choices at all times. If you hold ambitions - 'deviant' desires like awakening the dead - then it is even more so."

Then, Kurahashi faced Harutora and finally quietly declared, "Please choose."

Harutora's eyes widened and he made his decision.

He still felt a sense of contradiction. He was hesitant.

But the information about Ohtomo and his friends tightly bound Harutora.

Because he wouldn't be able to undo things if he made something happen to his friends. If he lost someone like Natsume again..... The current Harutora couldn't accept that terror or that possibility. If he hesitated like this, that tragedy might repeat itself.

".....I understand."

Harutora replied with this.

Kurahashi nodded and a slight smile emerged on Yashamaru's lips.

However.

"...Please wait."

A young, stern voice interrupted Harutora's resolution.

"Kon!?"

Suddenly, a girl appeared before him.

She kneeled on the ground, bowing towards Harutora. Two triangular ears and a leaf-shaped tail. A young girl wearing a suikan and hakama. Harutora's defensive shikigami Kon, whom he should have instructed to wait until later.

"Y-You, on your own.....!?"

Of course, Kurahashi and the others probably had investigated Harutora's defensive shikigami Kon long ago. Also, though she hid her presence, it was impossible for her to become a trump card to overturn the situation. Moreover, it had already stopped being a problem that could be solved by 'fighting power'.

No, that was why Kon had violated orders and appeared. She had appeared to convince Harutora, prepared to allow the enemies to strengthen their guard.

She spoke with her head still lowered:

"H-H-Harutora-sama. Please excuse my directness. These people cannot be trusted, that is clear. Please reconsider. No, you must reconsider."

"Kon....."

Harutora lost his momentum due to his shikigami's incredibly unexpected words. On the other hand, Kurahashi frowned and a mocking, ice-cold smile emerged on Yashamaru's face at this unanticipated intruder. It seemed that they hadn't anticipated that the defensive shikigami would admonish her master here.

In contrast, Kon completely ignored the reactions of Kurahashi and Yashamaru. She even turned her unguarded back to them, bowing her head to her master.

".....Kon."

Harutora's mouth twisted bitterly.

Then, he said resignedly:

"Aah, that's true. I can't trust these people. I never trusted them, and of course they know that. I understand. But there's no other way right now. We have to put our feelings aside for now and use each other."

It was the first time he felt so intensely impatient at his selfless, faithful shikigami.

She had understood that Harutora wanted her to wait and had watched everything from the side. Even Kon should have understood this kind of thing, he believed.

But.

"No."

Kon didn't back down. Her voice was uncharacteristically filled with firm conviction.

"I-I apologize for being direct. I-It is Harutora-sama who does not understand. Harutora-sama during the day would have understood without thinking, but the current Harutora-sama doesn't understand. If you 'cannot trust' them, do not think that you can compromise in other ways. You should not give it up for convenience and approach them so easily."

"Kon. That's already enough, so quiet--"

"N-No. P-Please listen to me. Harutora-sama. Isn't it obvious when you observe the people around them? What have these people done to those they were close to and who fought together with them? Please consider. Has a happy smile emerged on a single one of these people's 'comrades'?"

Then--

Kon raised her head.

Kon's blue eyes. Eyes as beautiful as glass and as deep as the sky stared through Harutora.

"Harutora-sama. You will not be smiling in the place that you are trying to go. Moreover, Natsume-dono will absolutely not have a smile either even if resurrected. Please remember, Harutora-sama. Natsume-dono died with a smile. Harutora-sama, are you prepared to taint that smile?"

"You.....!?"

Harutora was extremely agitated. Even he didn't know why he was this intensely angry. In comparison, Kon's eyes pointed straight at Harutora, clear and spotless.

He suddenly remembered. He had seen similar eyes to hers in his childhood. Eyes reflecting the sky and the universe like the surface of a lake. Those eyes contained a tenacity and toughness still unknown to Harutora.

On the other hand.

"....."

Yashamaru had dropped his expression at one point and silently prepared to step forward. But Kurahashi, who was constantly watching Harutora and the others, raised his right hand to stop him. Kurahashi waited for Harutora's decision. Though Yashamaru frowned, he gave Kurahashi the final decision.

"Then what do you want me to do!?" Harutora shouted loudly, not noticing the reactions of the adults.

"Are you trying to say it's fine because she died smiling!? Don't be ridiculous! I'll resurrect Natsume no matter what!"

He shouted desperately. He was almost raging. It was because in some sense, Harutora was admitting his own mistakes. Because he understood that Kon's words were correct, all he could do was snap back.

Kon spoke resolutely as she replied to him.

Like a katana on which the finishing touches had just been performed cutting an intricately-knotted rope in two.

"Then, Harutora-sama, you should complete it yourself without entrusting it to others."

Harutora's anger froze over.

Kurahashi was dumbstruck and Yashamaru unintentionally clicked his tongue.

Maybe they were being careless. But no one present had such thoughts.

Kon continued speaking with a completely unshaken demeanor.

"It is none other than Harutora-sama, Tsuchimikado Yakou's reincarnation, who is the authority on soul magic. Moreover, it was that Tsuchimikado Yakou who completed the Taizan Fukun Ritual that exists today. If Harutora-sama is Tsuchimikado Yakou, then there is no reason you cannot use the Taizan Fukun Ritual."

"Th-That - I can't, you know!? My memories of my previous life haven't awakened. My knowledge and abilities haven't changed. H-How would I be able to use the Taizan Fukun Ritual--"

"Harutora-sama, please don't say such unpromising things. You just stated that you would resurrect her no matter what."

"...!"

Harutora didn't have a reply.

Needless to say, it was a low probability in the realm of impossible. A tiny possibility that he would have to complete several tasks for. It was understandable that it wasn't worth any detailed consideration from Harutora, Kurahashi, or Yashamaru.

But it wasn't zero. There was indeed the possibility.

Then, the defensive familiar mercilessly continued towards her weak, agonized master.

"Harutora-sama, if you wish to repay Natsume-dono from the bottom of your heart, then I believe you should burden yourself with that responsibility. Why would you desire entrusting it to others? It's absurd to try to compensate her by borrowing the hands of evildoers. Even if you brought her back to the world like that, would Natsume-dono believe herself to be repaid?"

"However", Kon continued. Her voice was clear and composed, but it intensely pummeled Harutora's heart like a storm.

It hammered at him powerfully and roughly.

"However..... Harutora-sama, if you take the responsibility into your own hands and call back Natsume-dono..... Natsume-dono will be pleased no matter what the outcome is. She will definitely smile again."

"....."

Harutora could no longer return any words.

In that instant, Doman and Miyachi were battling outside, Ohtomo and Kagami were fighting in the agency, and the hordes of shikigami were rampaging.

But silence fell over the vast executive office as if that were separated from this world.

A solemn silence that headed a fateful split.

It was Yashamaru who broke it.

".....Time's up."

He smiled after saying this. This time, he didn't wait for Kurahashi's reaction, walking forward while reaching into the pocket of his slacks.

"The spiritual disaster purification teams will arrive soon. Harutora-kun, it will become difficult for you and me to move. The cards are all out already. Come, please choose."

Harutora closed his eyes.

Natsume's face emerged in the darkness that he shut the light out from. It wasn't her bloody, dead face that had been branded in his mind until now. It was Natsume when she had been alive and next to Harutora.

Natsume in her everyday clothing. Natsume when she had pretended to be a male. Natsume getting mad at Harutora. The embarrassed Natsume, with her face burning red. Natsume who was stiff from fright. The hurt, crying Natsume.

And the smiling Natsume.

When Natsume smiled, she smiled completely innocently.

Like a blooming sunflower.

...Right.

Harutora opened his eyes. Kon's tail wagged when she saw the expression emerging on his face.

In contrast.

Kurahashi pressed his lips together sternly. Yashamaru raised an eyebrow mockingly.

"......All that for nothing..... In the end, we've returned to the starting point. Things just won't go as we wish."

He wasn't downhearted about the outcome that failed to meet his expectations, nor was he fretful. A frigid smile just emerged on him like he was amused by the outcome. "Eh, whatever.' Yashamaru shrugged.

"Well then, Harutora-kun. Why don't you go the room from before and 'wait'. The commotion here will be ended soon. We'll talk about what comes later after daybreak."

Harutora gritted his teeth again because of Yashamaru's words. This time, Kon also rose, putting Harutora behind her to protect him and turning around to glare at Kurahashi and Yashamaru.

But just like Yashamaru said, if the spiritual disaster purification teams arrived, then the battle currently being carried out would have to end. The goal of Ohtomo and his friends was to take back Harutora. But Harutora was currently facing the Divine General Kurahashi Genji and the shikigami reincarnated from a Divine General. Even if he borrowed Kon's strength, it would still be difficult to deceive these two and meet up with his friends.

But his fate changed right then.

"Eh?"

Suddenly, Yashamaru was taken aback. Immediately afterwards, his gaze turned to his feet - to the faraway underground - with an expression of disbelief.

"......Kurahashi."

He spoke in astonishment, still seeming surprised:

"The seal on the 'Raven's Wing' has been undone."

"What!"

Kurahashi's expression instantly changed. Harutora immediately paid attention to the dialogue of the two when he heard this.

"Could it be--"

".....No. It's not. It's not 'those three'. We couldn't possibly have failed to notice them."

"Then."

Who was it? Before Kurahashi asked that, the door to the executive office opened behind Harutora's back.

Kurahashi, Yashamaru, Harutora, and Kon's gazes instantly turned towards it.

The door opened into a rectangular space. No one was there. What had that been? Just as he thought that, something dropped down as if falling. Ah. Harutora desperately held back from crying out.

A spider.

The blue spider shikigami he had just seen outside the window. Moreover, the spider held on to a slender object in its eight legs as it hung down from the ceiling by a thread.

Then.

"Well done, defensive shikigami. The boy also finished up over here."

He had some recollection of this voice. But before he thought of who the voice's master was, Kurahashi stomped on the ground with a bang and leaned forward. His expression was paler than ever before, and his eyes were widened so much that his eyes might pop out.

The voice didn't come from the spider. It came from the thing the spider held on to.

Then, the spider nimbly moved its legs, spreading open the thing it held on to.

A fan.

"Tsuchimikado! Summon the Raven's Wing!"

Chapter 4 - Counterattack

Part 1

A twist of fate rapidly approached. No, it was unclear whether it would arrive or not. But at the time she didn't have the strength to see it beforehand.

The pressing state of the world. Omens of war. The Onmyou Bureau had been reestablished by the military and he had been given command as the Onmyou Head. Also, he had the tall task of reviving the magic that was gradually declining.

Could he do it? She answered yes without any hesitation when her master asked her this.

How many people other than Yakou-sama would be able to complete a feat of this difficulty?

His ability was genuine. His fervor towards magic and his lofty ambition had no equal. She herself had become a first-rate practitioner because his ability had allowed her to bloom, so she understood.

He was a genius.

Such an extraordinary genius couldn't be granted wide-ranging powers without a purpose. It was now - with this difficult duty - that he had to complete his mission.

"Can you lend me your strength?"

She practically felt regretful at her master for asking her this. Why did he still have to confirm that obvious answer now? She scolded him and he laughed and apologized. Maybe she had only been born into this world to assist him to complete his mission with all her strength. She believed so.

At that time, a beautiful harmony developed in the world, everything matched perfectly, and formed a huge flow - forming fate. At least she thought so.

She didn't have any doubts at all.

Pure and innocent, completely clueless about the omens of the upcoming tragedy.

Of the many people who visited the Onmyou Agency to take back Harutora, it was actually Tenma who succeeded in infiltrating the agency building first.

But it wasn't something on the level of 'breaking in'. He entered properly through the side door that the agency members used.

"Sorry to bother this late at night. My mom insisted that we should at least give him a change of clothes."

He gave the name of an actual department and agency member, raising the paper bag in his hand with an extremely apologetic cordial smile.

The name of the agency member he was borrowing was Fujiwara Kenichi. He was the nephew of the teacher Fujiwara. He belonged to the General Affairs Department of the Onmyou Agency, and though he lived in the city, he had been sleeping at the office recently. He had heard this from Fujiwara a few days ago. Also, he had also heard that he had another nephew, a highschooler named Koji who wore glasses. His heart beat painfully behind his smiling face, but the person in charge didn't check with Fujiwara Kenichi after glancing at Tenma's face, smiling, saying "Thanks for your work", and letting him through the door instead.

Zero casualties, zero damage, zero magical energy expended, and it only took a brief forty-five minutes. The only thing hurt was Tenma's conscience. This was a peaceful and cunning infiltration, and even if the powerful Mystical Investigator Ohtomo saw it, he would have nothing to say and no issue to point out with the infiltration - but to be honest, Tenma was the only one among their group of companions who could perform this stunt.

Tenma didn't conceal his nervousness after entering the agency building - after all, there was no need- and first checked the map on the wall.

To an outsider, the Onmyou Agency building was a complex structure that seemed mazelike. This intricate and complex was an unignorable, troublesome factor for an invader.

But it was meaningless to Tenma.

"Um, excuse me. I'm sorry to disturb you during work, but could you tell me where the research and development room is?"

He politely questioned an agency member that he saw, receiving an enthusiastic reply, and then thanked him politely again. As a result, Tenma almost didn't get lost at all and easily got close to his destination.

Incidentally, Tenma was the first infiltrator since the Onmyou Agency was constructed to reach the depths of the agency building without using magic. Moreover, in this time, Tenma had not attracted the enemy's eyes at all. Then if you viewed Tenma's current actions as second-class magic, you could call its effectiveness superior to Ohtomo's and Doman's first-class magic in being able to avoid the enemy's eyes while slipping deep inside.

What was truly important in a real battle were the results, not the process. What's more, the smaller the effort required and the less conspicuous it was, the better. In any case, Tenma's second-class magic was - in terms of results - an ability like infiltrating the enemy's ranks themselves.

... 'Listen, Momoe Tenma.'

Saotome's words reawakened in his mind. Tenma carefully moved through the corridor.

... 'The Onmyou Agency's eyes aren't aimed at you right now. The opponents don't have you in their eyes at all. You have no quantifiable value to the Onmyou Agency.'

Though that was mean, it was the pure truth. Unlike Touji, Kyouko, and Suzuka, he was just an ordinary Onmyou Academy student. He wasn't good with practical skills, and he wasn't strong in actual battle either. He didn't have any particular strengths.

But.

... 'But, the Onmyou Agency is an 'enemy' to you. Then to you, these current circumstances are as if you used an extremely powerful stealth magic against the Onmyou Agency. It holds the same meaning and the same value.'

The so-called Onmyou Agency higher-ups, the professional world whose dazzling talents pushed against each other, the elites who climbed higher 'up'. It was very difficult for those people to notice an unimpressive ordinary person like him. Right, it was 'very difficult'.

Then, that became Tenma's advantage.

... 'Even a wall that looks solid at first glance will crumble if you remove the key stones. Even a pebble fallen along the road can become a 'weapon' depending on the situation. Listen up, pebble. .....No, Momoe Tenma. I'm going to aim at the target and throw you out. Smash the key portion of the Onmyou Agency perfectly for me.'

If you fail, I'll make it so that you won't be able to get married. He had been fiercely threatened in that mysterious manner. Though he still hadn't gotten over that fear, Tenma had gotten all the way here. He could no longer turn back.

".....It's here."

The third research and development branch.

It would be a lie to say he wasn't disappointed. But no, even Tenma understood this.

One could say that he had effortlessly infiltrated through wit and planning alone - but there were also other ways to see it. For example, that he had no power to resist if the enemies noticed him. He couldn't escape either. Though the opponents weren't watching him, on the other hand, he would be instantly defeated if he was noticed. In that sense, he was crossing a fearsomely 'dangerous bridge'. In other words, he was taking a huge risk and reaping the corresponding reward.

...What a gamble.

He even felt stunned. But he had gambled thus far to be of some use to his friends, and he didn't plan on doing anything but raising the stakes until the end. He understood and decided this himself.

...Moreover, the real work starts now.....

Tenma looked ahead again.

At the end of the corridor was a vast room with a high ceiling. There were several desks arranged in the depths and it was cut off by a glass partition. His target was the sealed storage room that was on the other side of that partition.

He had learned from Saotome that there were other security systems on the other side of that glass partition. But he had obtained a pass to get through there from her as well.

The problem were the people. The interior of the vast room had great visibility, and even at this time there were a few people still continuing to work at the desks.

Even if he were challenged in that room, he might be able to muddle his way through. But if he were noticed just once, it would be almost impossible to sneak past that wall again. Also, if he were noticed while trying to enter, then even putting on a harmless smile and using the name Fujiwara Kenichi would be ineffective. After all, it was a security system that was supposed to keep outsiders from entering.

...The entrance..... there. It was so visible. He wondered whether the people around would notice if he opened that door.

He entered the corridor in front of the room. Tenma hid behind a potted plant placed there and desperately racked his brain. The method he thought of was to cause a slight commotion in another place, draw the attention of the people in the room over there, and then take that opportunity to sneak deep inside.

...Like if he pulled the fire alarm.....

Since it was inside the Onmyou Agency building, that kind of classical method felt more useful than recklessly relying on magic. Okay. Tenma decided to turn back and look for a fire alarm.

But.

"...H-Huh?"

Suddenly, the bureau members in the room left their seats and started to get noisy. Moreover, they were coming this way.

...E-Eh!?

Had he been noticed? Tenma doubled back in a panic, hiding in the men's bathroom on the way. He rushed into a stall and locked it. His painfully-thumping heart felt like it was going to burst.

But.

.....They're not coming? I wasn't noticed?

The sound of footsteps running through the corridor soon grew distant. He gingerly peeped into the corridor outside but didn't see anyone. Puzzled, he came back into the corridor and headed to the room again.

There was no one in the room. Tenma's eyes widened.

".....What's going on?"

Though he didn't know the reason, this was an opportunity. Tenma came to his senses, taking out an identification card from his pocket. It was the pass through the security system that Saotome Suzu had given him. There was no stairwell behind the glass partition. Rather, several rooms were separated from each other. The Research and Development Department third branch was a department that invented magical tools, and each of those rooms were all research labs. Before Saotome transferred into the Imperial Household Agency Lingering Spirit Division, she had belonged to the Research and Development Department. That was why she was familiar with the security system.

Clutching the identification card, Tenma prepared to rush into the room from the corridor.

But--

Suddenly, he felt a gaze and stopped in surprise.

He spun around like a spring. But there was no one behind him. The empty corridor extended outwards.

.....What was that?

No one was there, but he was being watched. Tenma took a stance in the empty corridor, cautiously looking around.

Just then, something moved in the corner of his vision. The corridor wall. Near the ceiling. Tenma reflexively chased it with his eyes.

It was a spider.

".....A spider?"

A spider about as large as his thumbnail. Though the Onmyou Agency looked like it had the newest equipment, it seemed that it was still a structure with some old areas. Of course, there would be things like spiders. Could the gaze he felt just now have come from the spider? How could that be. His nerves were too much on edge.

But.

...Huh?

The spider silently stared at Tenma, preparing to climb away from the wall as if viewing him as harmless. He didn't know whether it was his mistake, but the spider's movements seemed mysteriously human. But Tenma couldn't keep his mind off it when he saw this spider.

An old, nostalgic, memory not suited for the moment.

It was a complete coincidence that he was able to recall it.

"....'Trick Spider'?"

The instant he couldn't help but murmur, the spider's movements completely stopped. Then, it slowly changed direction, looking back at Tenma. As if it were surprised at its name being called and unconsciously watching the opponent's actions again. No, maybe it wasn't 'as if', that might truly be the case.

This spider was a shikigami.

Moreover.

".....Why is my mom's test product in this kind of place?"

Upon careful inspection, the spider was blue. It was a trait of the manmade shikigami created by the Witchcraft Corporation, the popular magical tool manufacturer that Tenma's deceased parents had created.

Moreover, if he scrutinized more carefully, that spider's blue color was a richer, deeper blue than the color of the manmade shikigami that the Witchcraft Corporation created.

This was the color of original shikigami test products of his mother, the Witchcraft Corporation's chief designer. This 'Trick Spider' was also one of those test products, but it hadn't ended up becoming commercialized. Hence, there were very few people who knew of the codename 'Trick Spider'. The spider had stopped for that reason as well.

".....A 'Trick Spider'.....Come to think of it, a long time ago....."

Thinking of that codename became the trigger, and old memories faintly awoke.

Even among all the test products that his mother created, the 'Trick Spider' was a shikigami with one of the richest colors. Basically, it was a detection-type shikigami that moved according to the practitioner's chant and which shared vision with the practitioner. It only possessed the same movement speed and strength as an actual spider, and it could shoot out approximately thirty meters of spider silk, silk strong enough to support ten times its weight. But the spider silk of living spiders was known to be five times stronger than steel of the same thickness, so considering that, its performance was quite low.

But because of its shape and stealth, and because it used almost no magical energy, it would theoretically be able to materialize semi-permanently as long as it stopped moving and absorbed the surrounding aura for a while. Also, it would essentially require no magical energy to use afterwards as long as it was set up at the start. The shikigami could send images at any time, and the control of the magical energy system could be established by the shikigami. Though its activity was limited to a range of five hundred meters from the practitioner, in the extreme, even ordinary people would be able to use it as long as it was set up by a professional first.

Actually, Tenma had once asked his mother to let him use the Trick Spider as a child. Hence, he particularly had recollections of it among the large number of his mother's shikigami.

When it had been first developed as a test product, the Trick Spider was able to enter narrow spaces that the humans couldn't, and even normal people would control it with Onmyouji supervision. Judging by these two, there would be a definite demand for using the detection shikigami to collect information during disasters and the like. But it ended up being shelved and never commercialized because its magic was overly cumbersome and complex, and mass production was extremely difficult. There were only two, even among her mother's test products.

...I, I see! There's only two. There were only two Trick Spider shikigami. Why is it.....!?

Having once played with it, the young Tenma had felt quite disappointed when they decided to stop creating it, but his mother, the inventor, was pretty indifferent. It was extremely nostalgic - and a memory that would be a mistake to get nostalgic over now. But Tenma desperately dug through his memories, trying to recall it.

...Right, back then, I asked mom.....

The two test product Trick Spiders. Tenma had made a fuss that he wanted one if they weren't being used anymore. But he hadn't been able to get one. He still remembered his mother's words at the time. Sorry, Tenma - his mother had apologized to him.

There was someone who also felt that the Trick Spider was interesting and who wanted to privately acquire it. That person was a customer who had recently become a leader of part of their customer base and whom they had had many dealings with. As thanks, they had given test products to him - she said.

Wouldn't he just peep indiscriminately if they gave it to that kind of person? Her conscience hurt.

His mother joked happily, smiling wryly while showing a definite trust for that person. That's right. His mother had definitely said that.

The most popular product that had established the Witchcraft Corporation's position was the 'WA Swallow Whip' that was known as a binding shikigami.

It was the Onmyou Agency Mystical Investigation Department that was responsible for almost all of its purchases. The Mystical Investigators.

"Could it be?"

Tenma walked close to the wall that the spider was on. The Trick Spider still stayed motionless, continuing to stare at Tenma.

"Could it be that you're--"

Suddenly, as he was preparing to ask, the magical energy of something rushed towards him from far away. Eh? The moment he thought this, he was surrounded by a raucous breaking sound, and the extremely frightened Tenma's heart almost stopped.

It came from the room. He looked over there and couldn't help but doubt his eyes.

The room's windows along the outer wall had been shattered and demons and monsters had poured in from outside. Shikigami - like various monsters painted with ink. Moreover, weren't those Ashiya Doman's shikigami that had attacked the Onmyou Academy last month?

"W-W-Why!?"

The spider jumped onto the shoulder of the extremely panicked Tenma. He came to his senses because of this, hastily rushing behind the potted plant and crouching down.

The shikigami that invaded the room caused havoc in the vast room as they so desired. Then they moved deeper into the agency building through the corridor connecting the rooms. Fortunately, the corridor Tenma hid in was the farthest from the room's windows, but it was only a matter of time before they came by.

...Wh-Why? What happened?

The members had left the room in a panic because they had noticed Doman's shikigami approaching from outside the window. But why did Doman come? Tenma's mind was blank from incomprehension.

"...Ouch!"

Pain flared from his wrist.

Looking carefully, the spider had moved from Tenma's shoulder to his wrist at some time. Then, it jumped onto the ground and scuttled towards the depths of the corridor. Following that, it looked back at Tenma.

It was telling him to hurry.

Indeed, things wouldn't be simple if Doman's shikigami noticed him. Though Doman's shikigami seemed like they had been made lackadaisically, Tenma knew how much power each one actually hid after fighting them personally with his companions last month.

"O-Okay--"

Tenma quietly rose while inadvertently replying to the spider. Then, when he observed the situation in the room again, he noticed something.

"...Huh? The glass partition wasn't destroyed?"

There was a glass partition separating an inner portion of the room. It looked like such a fragile thing, but the shikigami weren't able to break through. No, although they approached and tried to destroy it, they experienced lag the moment they touched it.

...I see, it's the security system!

It looked like it had been enchanted with a barrier in addition to being outfitted with electronic security devices.

But it was breaking down.

The shikigamis' assault was overcoming the strength of the barrier. It would be destroyed sooner or later. The room on the other side would also be invaded.

"....."

Tenma stopped moving.

The spider was in a rush, making a tapping noise with its legs as if trying to say something. Even so, Tenma didn't move, staring intently at the room and the glass partition within.

If this went on, the shikigami would invade and advance sooner or later. In that case, the goal Tenma had come here for would go down the drain.

Tenma closed his eyes behind his glasses. But his hesitation was brief. When Tenma opened his eyes again, his eyes already held the light of determination.

Perhaps noticing the atmosphere, the spider that had prepared to head through the corridor first returned to Tenma's side. It climbed up the wall, jumping onto Tenma's shoulder again. He glanced at it. The spider kept staring at Tenma.

The Trick Spider couldn't speak, nor was it a shikigami that could use telepathy. But..... maybe because it was a shikigami his mother had made, he felt like the master's exhortation of 'don't get any strange ideas' was conveyed from the spider.

Tenma smiled bitterly.

Could this shikigami's master believe that Tenma had 'shrewdly' infiltrated the Onmyou Agency alone? How rude. Normally, he wouldn’t take this kind of unplanned action. As for 'strange ideas', he hadn't been thinking normally for a while now.

He straightened his spine, narrowing his eyes.

He focused his mind, refining his aura into magical energy.

"...Om marici sowaka..."

He crossed the fingers of his hands together. First was a Vajrapani mudra. He quietly chanted an incantation, blessing himself from his heart to his forehead, left shoulder, right shoulder, and top of the head. In the time he did this, Doman's shikigami continued pouring in from outside like an endless torrent.

The spider probably read his mind and stopped all its movements as if to keep from distracting Tenma. Tenma continued his magic, repeating the incantation seven times.

"...Om abiteamaris sowaka... Om abiteamaris sowaka..."

Finally, a group of shikigami noticed the corridor on this side and approached in a frenzy. Crack. An ill-boding sound came from the glass partition in the interior of the room, and lag flashed across its surface. The barrier would be broken soon. Tenma turned his hand seal into a stealth seal. He infused his magic with magical energy.

Stealth magic.

It was a first-class magic that he had learned from Ohtomo before. When Tenma had been worried about his own abilities. In the end, Tenma had never been able to use it successfully, and he hadn't been able to get over his worries.

But he still clearly remembered Ohtomo's words from back then. Magic is deep and vast, and there are many directions you can take. No matter what kind of ability you have, it can become a weapon. Ohtomo had spoken those words using Tenma's parents as an example.

Actually, though he was dull and unimpressive, that was why he had been able to get all the way here. Even his honest, well-meaning, low-key character could still be used as a 'weapon' and become magic.

He wasn't good at stealth magic. He recognized that he wasn't good. But that was probably wrong. Incorrect. Despite judging himself as 'mediocre', he believed that he was 'suited' for stealth magic. It matched him well.

An innocuous smile. A cautious attitude lacking self-confidence. These were all things that Tenma evaluated himself poorly for, but they were also honestly expressed on the outside. Tenma's self-evaluation had to be very low when he was among his skilled friends.

He didn't fool himself or forcefully overwrite those evaluations of himself.

He was at the bottom of his friends. That was evident to others. He admitted that. He admitted it and this changed the way he was 'viewed'.

For example, when he faced others, most people were uninterested, and some had a good impression but usually didn't think much of him. They looked down on him. They became careless - and left openings.

He would slip into those 'openings'. Even if he still didn't have self-confidence. Even if he was nervous.

It was said that the trick to stealth magic was to erase one's self-consciousness.

He had once believed that meant to think of nothing at all. He had believed it meant standing in nothingness.

That was wrong.

Erasing the self-consciousness meant abandoning oneself. It was to see one's 'true face' completely objectively and to simply accept it.

Tenma's mind was transparent. Thoroughly transparent - and at the same time it was being sharpened.

Of course, first-class magic wasn't so shallow that it could be completed with thoughts alone.

But Tenma, Harutora, Touji, Kyouko, Suzuka, and Natsume had continuously trained together. Regardless of how disparate their talents were, he definitely wouldn't lose to them in terms of time spent self-training.

"...Om abiteamaris sowaka..."

Doman's shikigami swarmed around.

They constantly passed around next to Tenma, surging towards the corridor.

The spider on his shoulder shook slightly. But Tenma stopped paying attention to the spider's reaction. After he stood up straight from the shadow of the potted plant, he swiftly strode towards the room.

His eyes were still half-closed. His strides were like those of a priest walking before a go-shintai.

The room was swirling with shikigami. A shikigami leapt and landed near him. A thrown chair landed with a crash behind him. Tenma’s hair swayed irritatingly because of the movements of the shikigami leaping back and forth.

'Gigigigi'. Laughter resounded back and forth. It was full of an ominous magical energy.

In the middle of all of this, Tenma took one step forward after another, completely unconcerned.

The spider sitting on Tenma's shoulder seemed to be holding its breath. But Tenma didn't let his gaze waver a bit, walking as if he were in a dream, and continued forward.

Then--

With a boom, a bright light poured in from outside the window. Fire. An unimaginably ferocious flame licked at the agency building, incinerating the shikigami. Though the flames didn't reach the insides of the room, the shikigami inside the room scurried in fright because of the heat that came through the broken windows.

The spider seemed stunned when it saw that.

On the other hand, Tenma stepped forward with completely the same movements as before, not retreating.

The flames vanished abruptly and the shikigami started scattering noisily. Tenma indifferently continued walking by himself through the intense chaos--

He reached the entrance of the glass partition deep in the room.

The card reader for the identification card he had obtained from Saotome was next to the door. With a click, the lock was released.

He slipped in and closed the door. "......Hah." Then, he finally took a breath.

Well done. Tenma glanced at the spider on his shoulder, feeling as if he had heard such a voice. He smiled and replied "could've been worse", then immediately rushed into the depths of the corridor.

Fortunately, thanks to the shikigamis' attack, he didn't see any agency members in the rooms past the partition. Tenma's goal was Research Lab One which was among these. Deep inside it was the sealed storage area.

"Here!"

He noticed Research Lab One. Using the identification card from before again, he entered inside.

Then--

"...Uwah!"

The Raven's Wing was right in front of him when he entered. It was placed on a wide platform in the center of the room. In the old birdcage that Takiko had held before. There was a raven inside it. Upon close inspection, one would notice that it had three legs. There was no mistake. It was the Raven's Wing.

Originally, the Raven's Wing was a magical tool that had been designated as a prohibited object. It had probably been moved back into this sealed storage room after being taken back, but it seemed like it was still in the same form as before.

Tenma's goal was the Raven's Wing.

"......I-It's good that it hasn't been sealed yet. But there's a barrier on this platform, right? How do I undo it....."

Unlike the security system outside, this barrier belonged to the type that sealed things inside. Then it should be constructed to be simple to undo from the outside. Tenma looked around the platform and the interior of the research lab.

Then, the spider on his shoulder jumped off as if it was finally its turn to take the stage. It rapidly crawled to the side of the platform. There was a metal cover there. After Tenma carefully took the cover off, a magical pattern carved into the floor appeared.

He couldn't tell what the magic was. But he read the spider's intent. In this kind of situation, breaking a tool or two wasn't really - well, he would apologize, recompense, and beg for mercy later.

"Shatter! Order!"

He threw out a metal-element charm that he had brought. The charm formed sharp magical blades, slashing open the floor like an axe.

The barrier on the platform was released. "Got it!" Tenma finally cheered loudly.

He reached his hand towards the birdcage to pull it closer. To be honest, the Raven's Wing was very scary. Harutora had lost control because of it and Natsume had lost her life. Moreover, it had supposedly been the attack of the Raven's Wing while possessing Harutora that had killed Natsume. It was a symbol of misfortune to Tenma.

But Saotome said that the Raven's Wing was necessary for Harutora. He trusted her and her words. That was why he had come here.

Tenma's expression tensed up as he opened the casing of the birdcage. At the same time, the Raven's Wing suddenly opened its eyes. It stared at Tenma with golden eyes.

"......Go to Harutora-kun."

He didn't know whether the Raven's Wing knew human language, but Tenma looked back emotionally into the Raven's Wing's eyes.

"Ah, there's also something I want you to tell Harutora-kun. Here's a note, give it to Harutora-kun--"

Suddenly.

With a flap, the Raven's Wing in the birdcage shook its folded wings.

Then, it rapidly and gracefully left the casing that Tenma had opened - the door of the birdcage. Tenma inadvertently stepped back, losing his balance and falling on his bottom.

Paying no heed to the narrow room, the three-legged raven flapped above his head. Every time it flapped its black wings, golden particles of light were scattered around it. It hadn't been that way the first time he saw it. However, he couldn't help but feel that it was beautiful when he saw it now.

The legendary bird, the yatagarasu.

The yatagarasu looked up at the ceiling - upstairs. It sensed it. It was being called for. In front of its gaze was Harutora. "Go!" Tenma shouted.

"Go, help Harutora-kun! ...Ah, no, first this! Bring this note too.....!"

He took out the note from his pocket in a panic, raising it towards the yatagarasu that flew above his head. The yatagarasu reacted, gliding down--

It flew by almost grazing his head, securely grabbing the collar of Tenma's T-shirt with its three legs.

"......Eh?"

The spider quickly got onto Tenma's shoulder. The yatagarasu curved its wings dramatically.

Then, it beat them in a flash.

The Raven's Wing flew up. It flew away from the research lab, accelerating like a bullet and speeding through the corridor.

"Ehhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.....!?"

As he was held in its talons, Tenma's scream dragged out for a very, very long time.

Part 2

Summon the Raven's Wing.

Harutora automatically complied with that instruction.

"Come! Raven's Wing!"

He called loudly.

Immediately afterwards.

"Yashamaru!"

"Yes, yes."

Kurahashi commanded sharply and Yashamaru stepped forward.

"You're quite noisy, so I'll have you be quiet for a bit."

Kon readied her blade. Pale blue flame - foxfire - burst forth to attack Yashamaru. Yashamaru stepped to the side on his toes, dodging the foxfire while closing the distance like magic. Moreover, his figure vanished. Stealth.

"Kon, I'm counting on you!"

Harutora called out and retreated. Kon's figure also vanished to chase Yashamaru, but in moments--

"Aah!"

She was hurled onto the floor, screaming as she materialized with lag.

During this time, Harutora formed a hand seal. He put up a simple barrier around him in order to impede Yashamaru's approach. "Oh my." Then, instead of approaching sneakily like before, Yashamaru reappeared touching the barrier.

But.

"Harutora-kun, if you're only at this level, I think the Taizan Fukun Ritual might be too heavy of a burden for you, you know?"

His white-gloved finger casually extended towards the barrier - and pierced it. Then, he easily tore open the barrier as if he were opening curtains.

"Scoundrel!"

Even as Kon, who had risen again, approached from behind his back while gripping her blade, Yashamaru didn't turn around.

"Sit."

First-class spirit language. Kon was immediately dragged down by an enormous weight, collapsing with a thud. Harutora growled and quickly re-formed a hand seal. He moved from a Dharmacakra seal to a magic binding seal. His fluid movements were thanks to repeated exercise and the battles he had experienced, but it was overly unreliable to the current Harutora. Still, when he didn't have any charms, the magic that Harutora could instantly use with his bare hands was quite limited.

"Om bishibishi karakara shibari sowaka!"

At least he could aim the magic towards Yashamaru's face from this distance as a surprise. As a result, Yashamaru made the stupid sound "Gwah!?" and leaned backwards.

But--

"How mean, you'll break my monocle, you know?"

As if sweeping away a cobweb covering his head, Yashamaru wordlessly ripped off the Unmoving Golden Chains and used his finger to adjust the position of his monocle. No good, he couldn't compete at all.

On the other hand, Kurahashi, who had left Harutora to Yashamaru, wordlessly formed a blade seal with his fingers and made a cut in midair.

The spider hanging from the top of the doorway by a thread flashed with a lag and vanished. Then, the fan the spider grabbed slowly swayed--

But didn't fall.

Kurahashi's eyes twitched.

The fan that had lost its support silently swayed and slowly descended like a cherry blossom petal. Moreover, the movement itself carried magical energy and brought a magical pattern forth in midair.

That magical pattern bloomed out with a snap.

A prismatic fog immediately spread out to pervade the surroundings while flowing in a swirl. Magic fog. And this was - an illusion. Harutora hastily retreated, surprised. Though Yashamaru raised an eyebrow, his expression was covered by the clouds in the blink of an eye and he became obscured.

"That fan was a mechanical shikigami."

He could hear Kurahashi's voice, but he was no longer sure where it came from. The fog even altered the propagation of the sound into vague, unclear echoes. But the fog that covered everything around him instantly parted to the left and right to make a path in front of Harutora. It led to the door to outside.

...Could he do it!?

"Kon!"

Harutora shouted. Kon noticed and then dematerialized, escaping from the first-class spirit language's binding.

He would take this opportunity to escape. Right as he thought of preparing to charge out with all his might:

"...Namu Great Bodhisattva Hachiman."

Clap. The sound of palms being brought together. At the same time, a powerful magical energy burst forth and opened up the fog in the room.

"What!?"

The fog was forced outward and cleared from the center of the executive office. Keeping his white-gloved hands together, Yashamaru glanced at the fan that was still floating quietly in the air.

"......Illusion magic is fundamentally a magic only usable on humans. Unfortunately, it seems that you didn't know about my existence."

He laughed and reached out his right hand towards the fan. After swiftly and forcefully clenching his hand, the fan floating in the air dropped to the ground with a crack.

...No good?

Yashamaru slowly looked back at Harutora. An empty, cold smile came to his lips like always.

But, Yashamaru's cold smile abruptly ended in the next instant. His expression became surprise. What was reflected in his monocle was Harutora - and what was behind his back. The thing floating outside the glass window from which the fog had been pushed away.

"Found you!"

Of course, that voice didn't reach the inside of the room. What reached them was movement. Harutora turned around. Outside the window of the executive room was a samurai brandishing a fist and riding a white horse in midair.

"Touji!?"

Harutora shouted. At the same time, the fist of the oni baring his fangs smashed into the window.

With a disorderly crashing sound, the glass shattered and the shards dropped to the ground. Because of the difference in air pressure, the air was sucked out and the fog that had just been pushed away swirled through the room again.

Yukikaze, carrying Touji, forcefully charged into the room through the broken window. The broken glass crackled again. Yukikaze neighed, its horseshoes crushing the fragments on the ground. The wind swept by and its long tail fluttered.

"Harutora!"

Yukikaze charged into the executive office, straight at Harutora. Touji extended out an arm while on horseback, and Harutora raised his hand to try to grab that arm.

Needless to say, Kurahashi and Yashamaru wouldn't permit this. Kurahashi and Yashamaru had already finished preparing magic to obstruct the two.

But they missed the book that had been thrown in after Touji and Yukikaze - a scripture.

"Now!"

After Yukikaze's figure vanished into the highest floor of the agency building, Kyouko shouted as she looked up staring into the night sky, and Suzuka, at the ready, released her magic.

"Full power release! Rampage!"

The scripture exploded because of the command that came from far below outside the window. The pages inside shot out like gunfire and scattered, filling the vast executive office with paper shikigami. Suzuka's original shikigami.

Kurahashi and Yashamaru were taken by surprise.

Then, Touji grabbed Harutora's hand.

"Harutora!"

When Touji in his the samurai-state passed by, he easily lifted Harutora up with one hand. Harutora used the force of the tug to leap upwards, and though his body buckled, he jumped up behind Touji. At that time, Yukikaze was already passing through the executive office.

With the space in the rear filled with prismatic fog and buried in paper shikigami, Yukikaze passed through the doorway out the executive office. It was like an explosion escape scene.

An astounding aura spouted from Kurahashi's body.

But he very quickly controlled it and changed it to magical energy while forming a basic seal.

"......Namah sarva tatha gatebhyah sarva.....!"

Acala's Fire Realm magic. Flame swept through the executive office, the fog instantly evaporated, and Suzuka's shikigami were burned to ashes in droves.

On the other hand, Yashamaru stood there indifferently as his hair was blown around in the center of the scorching Fire Realm magic.

He cast his gaze out of the window, probably at the master of the shikigami below. Then, he turned his head in a bad mood, glaring at the doorway that Harutora and the others had left from - and the destroyed fan fallen at its base.

Needless to say, there was a barrier around the executive room as well. Moreover, though the permanent barrier covering the agency building had been opened, it should have been repaired by Independent Exorcist Yuge. If he used all the strength in his body, he should be able to physically break the glass - though his hand might be injured if he wasn't careful. But the white horse shikigami was another matter. As long as the permanent barrier was operational, the shikigami couldn't possibly be able to break in from the outside.

Then--

".....The illusionary fog. It looks like the barrier was opened up behind our backs. Though its primary purpose was probably to let the Raven's Wing in....."

Tch. Yashamaru lightly clicked his tongue.

Then, he put his hand on his waist in displeasure and faced Kurahashi who had finished chanting the Fire Realm magic.

"What's going on?"

"I also want to know. However, it’s reality. We can only accept it."

".....Miyachi-kun?"

".....No, it's my fault for failing to check."

Kurahashi replied calmly and thoroughly. His attitude was astonishingly strict, even towards himself. Yashamaru glared at his ally with an intense, angry look for a while, but in the end he deliberately shook his head and let out an empty sigh.

"Hah. .....Well, whatever. Should I go chase?"

"No. There would be no choice if it were the three Tsuchimikados, but it's not that kind of situation right now. Don't forget your position. It would be troublesome for me if you acted recklessly."

"What, are you sure you're not just mad from being dumped by the relatives a generation above and below you?"

Yashamaru quipped at him, which was rare. It hadn't been his intention to see things fail right as they were about to fall into his hands.

But Kurahashi paid no attention, handing out instructions.

"Never mind them for now. The spiritual disaster purification team arrived just now, so we'll leave it to them. You - go guard Tsuchimikado Natsume's body."

"Ahh....."

The slightly unhappy Yashamaru also said "I see" and lit up with approval when he heard this. Being unmoved by unpredictable situations and quickly responding with suitable force was a strength that Yashamaru rated Kurahashi highly for.

"Understood. Then, what about you?"

After Yashamaru asked, Kurahashi shot a gaze at the fan.

He spoke briefly and quietly.

".....I'll go check."

The roundabout in front of the Onmyou Agency building main entrance had a hellish appearance.

The hordes of shikigami that were being spewed forth one after another mixed and interwove, a wind blacker and denser than the night shook the trees and coiled into a turbid serpent. The aura flow that cut open the surface of the pavement spewed forth, reaching high above their heads like lava from a volcano, and then descended.

Charms danced in midair, floating with numbers as great as cherry blossoms. Each one was infused with an abnormal magical energy. Then, their magic activated one after another. General Onmyoudou, Imperial Onmyoudou, and other magics slowly scattered haphazardly like an overturned toy box.

However.

A huge fire incinerated it all.

A multifaceted magic. An ancient technique with a myriad of capabilities.

The burning flames didn't let anything approach.

"...Noumaku sarabatatagyateibyaku sarababokkeibyaku sarabatatarata sendamakaroshada kengyakigyaki..."

Miyachi chanted Vajrapani's most fundamental mantra. It was the Vajrayana subjugation magic, Fire Realm. He single-mindedly continued chanting the Fire Realm magic without using any other tricks.

To the exorcists, the Fire Realm magic was the standard purification magic against spiritual disasters. Most of the current exorcists had a firm grasp of the Fire Realm magic.

But if they were here, most exorcists would realize that they were ignorant and would feel ashamed at their pride. That was the extent of the disparity between the Fire Realm magic Miyachi controlled and the Fire Realm magic of the rest of the world.

It was like an immense, divine being.

Sometimes it was a flaming dragon, sometimes it was eight huge serpents, sometimes it was a majestic tiger, and sometimes it was a giant as tall as a building. Every time, it felt like it wasn't of this world. It was like Acala's incarnations were

coming down in droves to incinerate the enemy. A normal Onmyouji would absolutely feel the meaning of fear against these 'flames'.

Burning every demon, turning three thousand worlds into ashes. Acala's Fire Realm magic.

There were very few people born who possessed enough ability to bring forth its true might. One person with the spiritual ability might be born every ten years, and after long years of harsh training would finally be 'able to use' the original Fire Realm magic. Though General Onmyoudou's Fire Realm magic was a ready-to-use magic that had been made easier to activate, its profoundness hadn't changed.

If someone with true power used it, they would be able to use 'fire' to incinerate shikigami, curses, and forbidden magic of every type.

That was the Fire Realm magic.

"......My, oh my."

An outpouring of discontent came from Doman in an extremely surprised tone.

"What an astonishing spiritual power. That power might be comparable to Kobo-Daishi."

A faint wry smile flitted over Miyachi's mouth.

Even if he tried to interrupt the incantation, Miyachi's 'magic' was unfazed. That wasn't the extent of his training. His magic became part his body, his flesh, blood, and bone.

"You flatter me, Priest. In the end, I am but a lowly 'magic artisan."

In the period of time this conversation took place, the curses that Doman secretly released continuously assaulted Miyachi. But they burned and vaporized once they

touched him. That bearded youngster's kasaya-wearing figure now seemed to have merged with the flame.

Miyachi wore golden fire and directed huge flames.

On the battlefield, Miyachi seemed like a monk possessed by Acala. Though he was human, the overwhelming aura that suppressed his surroundings didn't fall a step behind the ara-mitama Doman.

But Miyachi had no room for complacency.

"Also, Priest. It seems that this evening you haven't brought the two defensive shikigami that you let us meet last month. It looks like my subordinate's blade wasn't worthless."

After the slightly sour accusation, Doman complained happily.

"Hmph, indeed. That divine blade user should be locked up for leaving his post."

"Oh, you understand quite well."

"Hoho, don't look down on this old man, I quite enjoy watching liveliness. I always have a grasp on the practitioners that interest me."

"......Excuse me, but you're quite an irritating old man....."

"Hohoho, this old man is one of the so-called 'madmen'."

Even Miyachi made a bitter expression at Doman casually saying this about himself.

But Miyachi's accusations hit home. The three defensive shikigami Doman had commanded when he had attacked the Onmyou Agency hadn't shown up this time. It wasn't that he was reluctant to bring them all out, he was still unfamiliar with his new body. There was no problem with using them, but their strength fluctuated quite a bit and he didn't feel that they were stable enough to withstand a battle.

"Well, it feels a bit lacking in elegance to have those guys join a competition with you. .....So what's next? Everything has been Fire Realm magic. It's indeed a wonderful, skilled technique..... but you should have something else, right? Other things?"

"Not at all. All I have to show you is this Fire Realm magic, Priest."

"Ho. Why do all the exorcists these days seem quite lacking in artistry. 'That guy' is much more interesting in comparison."

"Truly, truly. It seems that you've taken quite a liking to 'Shadow'."

"He's not bad. That youngster Ohtomo Jin is quite commendable. However, you're inferior in comparison. This old man still can't tell you his address."

"That's regrettable."

Miyachi replied with a smile.

The nickname 'Enma' Miyachi of the Twelve Divine Generals was quite realistic seeing as his attitude was able to be so graceful before Ashiya Doman. But Miyachi was able to remain calm because his goal wasn't to 'purify' Doman.

Miyachi's mission was just to 'suppress' him. To hold Doman back. Of course, that wasn't any normal mission, but it was an 'easy' position compared to Ohtomo at the Onmyou Academy who had fully engaged Doman. He wasn't completely hard-pressed.

But the situation instantly changed, unrelated to Miyachi's successful battle.

Suddenly, Miyachi's and Doman's expressions simultaneously changed. The former frowned while the latter grinned.

A new aura had emanated from within the agency building.

This was - the Raven's Wing.

"Hoho, how surprising. It wasn't this old man, nor was it Ohtomo, could it be Yakou's reincarnation? It looks like there are various parties trying to wriggle into the Onmyou Agency. Good, good. Now they're truly the halls of 'magic'."

"....."

Without replying to Doman's frivolous words, Miyachi seriously tried to clearly see the change in the situation.

The Raven's Wing's release couldn't have been the will of Kurahashi and the others. Something unexpected had happened. No new instructions had come from Kurahashi, so had his mission not changed? Was he in a state to give him instructions? Slight hesitation disrupted Miyachi's magic.

In an instant.

"...Hoh."

A curse that sneakily approached was incinerated by the spreading Fire Realm magic. Kukuku. Doman let out a dogged laugh.

"You're unexpectedly weak to attacks from behind. It's because you're always fighting against mere spiritual disasters."

"......I'm quite ashamed."

He instantly turned his attention back to Doman before him with a bitter smile.

"I won't let you go, you know?"

The boy housing Doman said.

"I won't forgive such impertinence."

"....."

That was natural. He absolutely wasn't a simple opponent that would allow him to move freely. He had known since the beginning that he would be consumed the instant he became negligent against this kind of opponent.

Miyachi wordlessly thumbed the rosary in his hands.

"Noumaku sanmanda bazaradan kan!"

Kagami chanted a curse of Acala, which became a serpent of fire to attack Ohtomo. The two knife shaped simple shikigami he had released beforehand leaped through the air slashing left and right.

Ohtomo's expression was ice-cold as he faced this. He was neither panicked nor rushed, calmly tossing down three charms.

His hands formed a blade seal.

"...Noumaku samanda bazaradan sendamakaroshada sowataya untarata kanman..."

He chanted a protection magic also belonging to Acala. While he offset Kagami's curse, the charms he dropped became two magnets, attracting the approaching knives.

...As expected.

Ohtomo was unfazed by Kagami's waves of attacks. But that was natural. He was still relaxed. It would be very disappointing if he lost his calm at this level.

Starting now, he would show him.

"Om bishibishi karakara shibari sowaka!"

Unmoving Golden Chains. Ohtomo essentially paid no attention. He jumped aside just like with the simple shikigami from before, believing it to be the same kind of move. Indeed, to a practitioner of Ohtomo's caliber, Unmoving Golden Chains couldn't possibly be effective from the front.

However, that was the goal. The Unmoving Golden Chains was a magic that bound the enemy with a net of magical energy. Kagami's 'net' formed a 'cage'.

Becoming the 'Eight-Holed Soul-Locking Cage'.

Then, he took out a stone wrapped in bamboo leaves along with salt. Kagami joyously watched the widening eyes behind Ohtomo's glasses.

He placed the stone on the floor and sprinkled the salt.

"By the green of these bamboo leaves, by the withering of these bamboo leaves, let green die! And by the drought of this salt, wither! And by the weight of these rocks, sink!"

Ohtomo's secret art that he had heard from Tsuchimikado Harutora before. The 'Eight-Holed Soul-Locking Cage' curse that had once made Ashiya Doman exclaim.

...How's that!

He had searched for information during his confinement and Kagami had adapted the method into his own.

But Ohtomo's 'counter' was very concise.

"...Order."

He quickly tossed out a simple shikigami charm. The commercially available shikigami charm activated without any additional magics. What was summoned was a flat, humanoid and expressionless doll that was prepared by default. But Ohtomo turned the Unmoving Golden Chains that Kagami had turned into a cage towards the shikigami charm.

"Ah!"

The Unmoving Golden Chains magic binding was baited by the simple shikigami, and Kagami's curse raged within that magic binding. Needless to say, the simple shikigami instantly vanished without a trace - but that was all. Ohtomo's 'Eight-Holed Soul-Locking Cage' curse was a curse that would seal the opponent in a barren cage. As long as the Unmoving Golden Chains cage was shut, the effects wouldn't spread outside. Simple.

"Kagami-kun."

Ohtomo spoke coldly.

"I don't have time to join you in these boring games."

It went without saying that when he used curses as a practitioner, he also prepared means to 'counter' the curse. Though the probability that the 'Eight-Holed Soul-Locking Cage' worked against Ohtomo was very low..... being countered this easily made him greatly ashamed.

...Ah, whatever.

That just now had just been a small surprise. The fun activity before things started for real.

Though Ohtomo didn't seem to like it.....

"Don't be in a rush, Senpai. Things just started - Order!"

He tossed around his original shikigami charms and they formed wild skeletal beasts one by one and charged ferociously towards Ohtomo. But Ohtomo's expression never changed. He lowered his stance slightly, pointing at him with the tip of his cane while infusing energy into the tip and weaving a magical pattern in midair.

"Fall into confusion."

Adding first-class spirit language to the magical pattern that he wove, he rapidly spun the tip of his cane. The skeletal beasts pouring towards Ohtomo stopped where they were, then started devouring each other.

Their unmistakable fangs cut open bone as coarse teeth crushed bones. But by then, Kagami had already begun the next magic.

Anyway, he would attack, attack fiercely, and attack until the end. Shady words and deeds were Ohtomo's area of expertise. The 'Ogre Eater' wasn't arrogant enough to believe he could win in such a competition.

He focused his mind, refining magical energy in a flash and forming a seal.

A sun seal.

"Namasamanda bodanan karon bigiranahan so ushinisha sowaka!"

The Usnisa Vijaya mantra, viewed as one of the most powerful of all the mantras. It was the Usnisa Vijaya method of Imperial Onmyoudou. Kagami wove an intense mantra that became a raging wave that approached Ohtomo.

In response, Ohtomo stamped his fake leg and cane with a 'clack clack clack', putting up a barrier that he had never seen before.

At the same time, he twisted his thumb and index fingers and then flicked them out, snapping three times.

"Saratie saratie sowaka - om marici sowaka--"

Ohtomo, wrapped in the barrier, avoided Kagami's Usnisa Vijaya mantra that came crashing down at the last second. Then, he slashed out with the Marici Divine Whip. A subjugating whip of magic struck Kagami.

...Ugh!?

"हुं!"

The seed syllable mantra that he managed to chant in the nick of time became a shield of defensive magical energy against the whip. But even though the shield defended against Ohtomo's whip, the impact went through. Smash. A paralyzing shockwave thrashed his entire body's aura - his spiritual body. Kagami gritted his teeth and endured it.

...Damn!

He couldn't face him.

His magic was manifold and effective. His technique was sharp. His clever tactics brought them all together.

Strong. As expected, he had to admit that Ohtomo had the advantage when it came to magical battles against humans. This painful sensation that he seldom experienced was undoubtedly the feeling of facing someone 'first-rate'.

But that was why his heart surged. There was a value in passionately, greedily learning without care for a thing.

"Noumaku saraba tatagyateibyaku saraba--!"

Kagami formed a basic seal, changing his attack to the Fire Realm magic.

Even in Imperial Onmyoudou, there were only a handful of great techniques like the Usnisa Vijaya Mantra. But Ohtomo overcame it. The magic Kagami formed had openings - proof that his proficiency with the magic was still shallow. With someone of Ohtomo's level as his opponent, it was meaningless how difficult the magic was if the opponent didn't wield it well enough.

On the other hand, probably the only thing he had that could win against Ohtomo was a powerful magical energy. Even powerful strength had artistry to it. He would blast him directly all his power. Though gorgeous big techniques and sneak attacks were undoubtedly Kagami's weapons, he understood his true value deep inside. If he challenged a strong opponent, he ought to fight with his most outstanding talents.

But if using the abilities he was proud of was a form of strategy, then keeping the opponent from using those proud abilities was also a form of strategy.

"Fool."

Ohtomo smiled coldly.

Right afterwards, the trap Ohtomo placed activated. Actually, he had set it four steps ahead. Of the charms he had casually dropped, the extra charm that hadn't become a magnet leaped out.

A curse charm.

Someone with a weak spiritual resistance would have fainted upon just seeing it, and they might even suffer spiritual encumbrance depending on the circumstances. If he were forced to describe its appearance, then it was a giant head with wildly scattering hair and no eye sockets. The vicious, ominous shikigami let out a high-pitched cackle, spreading apart rows of black teeth.

It bit down at him.

The hair rose all over his body. For a moment he was unable to suppress his terror. The only reason his Fire Realm incantation went uninterrupted was because of the strenuous, hellish training that he had endured while spitting blood.

His practiced Fire Realm magic interwove with Ohtomo's curse and ignited into flame. Though it was incinerated by the fire, the shikigami's cackle didn't stop. It was undoubtedly a terrible, fantastic scene from a nightmare.

"Kagami-kun."

Ohtomo spoke again.

An extremely frigid gaze surfaced from behind his glasses, and he smiled lightly.

"Out of the way."

He inadvertently swallowed.

Intense anger poured forth as his stance almost collapsed. Anger at himself and from his loathing of Ohtomo. He wanted to break everything he saw to pieces. A destructive impulse that even he couldn't control.

If only.

If only he could release the seal on his forehead.....

Kagami with his teeth clenched and the devilish Ohtomo. In the space between the two flew intense sparks of willpower and pride more so than magical energy.

But the circumstances of their intense battle suddenly changed.

Because the two of them both noticed in unison.

"Wha!? That--"

"The Raven's Wing!?"

Kagami looked at Ohtomo in astonishment. But Ohtomo's expression didn't change a bit because of that aura.

Kurahashi had explained the gist of the situation to Kagami after ordering him to move out. Ohtomo's target was his student Tsuchimikado Harutora. Ohtomo's goal was to take back the 'new candidate' of Yakou's reincarnation. And apparently they had learned from the Raven's Wing that Harutora was Yakou's reincarnation.

That Raven's Wing was currently beating its wings with impunity inside the Onmyou Agency. What did that mean? He didn't think that Kurahashi would have allowed this 'unexpected event' so easily. Was this a part of his plans? But what meaning was there in releasing the Raven's Wing now?

Before Kagami reached a conclusion, resolve emerged on Ohtomo's face. Kagami couldn't help but click his tongue when he saw the fighting spirit vanish from Ohtomo's body.

"Bastard! I'm not letting you go!"

He definitely wouldn't allow an arrogant action like abandoning the fight with him altogether. Even if Ohtomo tried to escape, he would grab the opportunity to achieve victory.

However.

"Oh my, sorry, Kagami-kun. As an apology, I'll release the curse from last time."

Ohtomo grinned with a leisurely look that had lost its sharpness from before.

He naturally remembered the 'curse from last time' that Ohtomo spoke of. The 'Hinamatsuri Repurification'. The spat from right after the 'Type-Chimera' produced by the spiritual disaster terrorist attack had been purified by Harutora and the others.

...He was still bluffing like that!

Kagami had spent quite a bit of time figuring out that the curse Ohtomo laid was a complete lie. He made his conclusion. He ignored Ohtomo's words, focusing more magical energy into a basic seal that he formed.

But.

"Spell release - प्रज्वलोष्णीष."

Right as he chanted the key incantation of Prajvalosnisa, Ohtomo's magic, that had been dormant since spring, activated.

The blazing light method of Tiantai Buddhism. A light that was believed to be capable of instantly blinding evil spirits painted the entire corridor where the two of them stood in dazzling white light. It wasn't limited to pure vision, as the magical flash also scorched the practitioner's spirit-seeing ability. Even so, Kagami would probably have been able to immediately put up some level of defense with his reactions. But this time, Ohtomo's magic had exploded on Kagami 'directly'.

But it wasn't Kagami himself who was cursed.

It was the lenses of his sunglasses.

Kagami howled loudly, tearing off his sunglasses and covering his eyes. He had closed his eyes beforehand - but even so, the light that pierced through his eyelids still left an intense halo of light in his eyes. Ohtomo frowned and opened his narrowed eyes.

"Hahaha. It's your fault for acting cool by wearing sunglasses indoors. Was that a good lesson? Goodbye."

The students might even feel sympathy for Kagami if they heard this. Ohtomo's presence grew distant without saying anything more hateful than that. Though he tried to pursue him, his eyes were blinded, and even his spirit-seeing 'sight' had been damaged. Ohtomo hadn't used the magic to deal with Kagami, he had used the magic to escape. Moreover, it hadn't been a magic object that he placed, it had just been a triggering mark. Also, because it had been camouflaged, he wouldn't have noticed first unless Ohtomo had let him know.

He grit his teeth and listened, but he could no longer hear the sound of Ohtomo's fake leg. Kagami bellowed angrily at the sky.

...It still wasn't enough!

He wouldn't give up. He would chase him to the bottom of hell.

But as his anger flared, Kagami's rationality held fast and his calm, composed reasoning ability admitted that even if he caught up, he probably wouldn't be able to beat Ohtomo.

Not enough. He wouldn't be able to catch up like this.

But this wasn't everything he had. Though he couldn't do anything immediately about his seal, there was another source of strength for Kagami left inside the agency building.

'Higekiri'.

Where Shaver, the servant shikigami that Kagami controlled, resided. Kagami ignored the pain in his eyes, starting to run with his hands on the wall. He went to the sealed storage room where Shaver was kept.

"Just you watch, Ohtomo! I'll kill you!"

His bellow was filled with anger - but it was also like the joyful howl of a bloodthirsty beast.

Part 3

His head spun. He was out of breath. His heart pounded and he felt dizzy.

But right now, Harutora was undoubtedly sitting on the back of Yukikaze that Touji rode, rushing through the halls of the Onmyou Agency. His sense of reality couldn't keep up with the rapidly developing situation. Only his heartbeat kept pounding.

"Touji!"

Touji, in his samurai-state, smiled fearlessly and then replied to his voice that came out naturally.

"Bakatora! You idiot, this isn't something I'll be compensated for with just a couple of punches!"

"......!"

Touji's lively scolding resounded in Harutora's heart. Yukikaze didn't stop for a moment during this time, galloping through the agency building.

The sound of horseshoes reverberated and wind howled past their ears. Though it felt natural, this was the first time he had ridden a horse through a hallway. The ceiling was close in the narrow passageway, but their speed couldn't be compared to anything on foot. It was as if he were riding a rollercoaster indoors.

Just then.

"It's pretty late, but--"

"Touji?"

"What are you going to do? Have you decided?"

Touji's look went over his shoulder and ran past his flashing helmet, through Harutora. A shudder ran through Harutora's whole body.

Even now, he was moved by his good friend's understanding and tolerance. Touji's steadfastness was collected in those two short sentences. Touji was prepared to turn back and bring him back to the executive office if Harutora said 'I'll die in Natsume's place, so let's go back'. He wouldn't say or ask anything after that.

"Yeah."

Harutora replied to Touji's question in a murmur.

"Let's keep going!"

"...Alright. Yukikaze, downwards!"

Accepting Touji's instructions, Yukikaze headed downstairs. Its feet floated slightly as it charged downstairs through the stairway.

"But, Kyouko's instincts were completely on the mark! I never thought she would be able to find you instantly!"

"Kyouko?"

"Yeah! She said that there would be 'activity' if we waited. She also called it on the highest floor - the executive office!"

"Then, what about everyone else?"

"They're outside! We'll meet up after escaping!"

They were going to see everyone. The instant he was told this, he thought of the petrified, helpless figures of his companions in front of Natsume's remains.

"Touji. Listen, I--"

He impatiently tried to say something, but Touji interrupted him without looking back. "Save it for later!"

Touji carefully surveyed the surroundings while they went down. Maybe it was because they had taken shelter because of the shikigamis' attack, but they couldn't see a single agency member now. The samurai and Harutora behind him charged down the empty, spiraling staircase on the white horse.

But, even if there were no agency members, there were other things.

"...They're here."

Figures leaped up the staircase in front of them. Three, no, four. Doman's shikigami. He had originally thought they had all been incinerated by the flame magic, but it looked like some had broken inside.

Harutora and Touji had long since completely understood the tenacity of those shikigami. Touji gave up on forcefully breaking through, pulling on Yukikaze's reins. They passed by the noses of the shikigami going up the stairs and rushed into the floor's corridors.

The shikigami chased from behind, but--

"Kon!"

"Y-Yes!"

Kon released foxfire at the shikigami after being summoned by her master. Harutora's strength had grown from when they had attacked the Onmyou Academy. That was directly reflected by the strength of his defensive shikigami Kon.

Blue flame covered the corridor, cutting off the pursuit from the stairs. But this time, other shikigami came charging from around a corner. It seemed that there were quite a number of shikigami that had broken into the agency building. After seeing Harutora and the others, they charged like hyenas swarming their prey.

"Harutora! Use my charm!"

"Understood!"

Touji gripped the reins for him and Harutora took out charms from the charm box on his waist.

"Order!"

He hurled out water-element charms, pushing back the shikigami with a magical torrent. Kon also flew into the air behind Yukikaze, becoming her master's shield. She unleashed foxfire at the tail of one of them, cut down one near the ceiling with her wakizashi, and then suppressed the shikigami that appeared in droves.

But if they wanted to think about escaping from the agency building, they wouldn't be able to handle each and every one of Doman's tenacious shikigami.

"Touji! Can we go out from that window?"

"Unfortunately, the outer walls have a barrier! Even for the room from before, we calculated that only I would be able to break in!"

The barrier had been broken according to someone else’s plans, so he had been able to charge in with Yukikaze. Alhough Touji was quite reckless, Yukikaze was also like that.

"Then where will we go out from?"

"Through the entrance! According to Suzuka, the permanent barrier isn't active there, so we can go out through the entrance!"

"In other words, we have to go down a floor!"

"That's right!"

The shikigamis' assault didn't stop as they conversed loudly. Though the corridors weren't as crowded with shikigami as they had been at the Onmyou Academy, they

didn't have any space to stop. Thanks to the complex structure of the agency building, Yukikaze seemed baffled as well.

He didn't know whether they should simply return to the staircase from before. Even if they searched for another set of stairs, they couldn't guarantee that there were no shikigami there. If they would have to go down a floor anyway.....

...No, wait!

"Touji. The elevator!"

"Too dangerous!"

"But we can just drop through the shaft!"

"...I see! But even so, where is it!?"

Though he approved Harutora's idea, Touji didn't know where to have Yukikaze go.

"H-Harutora-sama!" But just then, Kon flew by Harutora's side.

"Th-The passageway we just passed through had a sign for the elevator!"

"Where!?"

"This way!"

With Kon leading the way, Touji pulled the reins and changed Yukikaze's direction. They doubled back, taking a right partway.

The elevator room was connected up ahead. "Good!" Touji shouted. Fortunately, there were no shikigami around.

After Yukikaze rushed into the elevator room, Touji leaped off its back without stopping, putting his hands on the door to the elevator.

"! .....Uooooh.....!"

The armor covering Touji's body flashed with slight lag. But the strength generated from the released seal pulled open the elevator door.

A dark elevator shaft appeared. Kon leaped in first, using foxfire to provide light.

"Yukikaze! Please!"

Harutora took the reins in place of Touji and Yukikaze charged into the elevator shaft. Touji also leaped onto the descending Yukikaze.

Yukikaze rapidly dropped down a floor with the help of gravity. Kon's blue foxfire illuminated the narrow, dark passageway. They fell through the extremely narrow space with bated breath. But they would go underground if they fell to the bottom. When would they go out? The instant Harutora thought this, Yukikaze stopped their fall with a stride. It had sensed the height.

"So it's here. ...Order!"

He threw a metal-element charm at the door before him. After the metal door indented, Yukikaze neighed loudly and kicked out with its front legs.

They were out. In front of them were shikigami, but the floor sign stated '1F'. He thanked Yukikaze while shouting:

"Out of the way!"

Hurling a fire-element charm, he ignited all of the shikigami. Yukikaze galloped past. Kon swiftly followed behind.

But there were several times more shikigami on the first floor than the floor above. They laughed 'gigigigi' as they appeared continuously, gathering towards Yukikaze and blocking their path. They tried to attack - no, they tried to capture them. Harutora threw out all of his charms while Touji and Kon counterattacked the shikigami that hurtled towards them.

"Where's the exit!?"

"Who knows!?"

"You should at least look at a map if you're breaking in!"

"I charge in blind!"

As its riders bickered with each other, Yukikaze avoided the shikigami that twined around its feet, jumping to a place close to the ceiling. Harutora and Touji hastily looked down while fending off the shikigami below them.

Just then.

"Found you! Over here!"

It was Suzuka's voice. Though it had only been a short one or two hours, it felt nostalgic. Wind whipped forth and bird-shaped paper shikigami flew in front of Yukikaze. After appearing in front of Harutora and the others, they circled back to the corridor they had come from. "Yukikaze!" Harutora shouted. The white horse shikigami pursued the birds without needing him to tell it.

The birds glided through the building, flying magnificently as they turned through the corridors multiple times. Yukikaze kicked with its horseshoes to scatter the shikigami that rushed to pursue them. The birds headed towards one of the side doors on the back of the agency building. The door had already been opened. He could see Kyouko's defensive shikigami Hakuou and Kokfuu outside the door. They swung a katana and spear to fend off the shikigami trying to reach them.

Touji yelled:

"Kyouko! Out of the way!"

At the same time, Harutora released a water-element charm. He had already added the a wood-element charm to the magic, and spear-like branches immediately extended to the doorway, wrapping up every shikigami in front of them. Then.

"Kon!"

Foxfire ignited the branches, incinerating the shikigami along with them. The bird shikigami led the way, followed by Yukikaze and Kon, speeding through the hallway adorned with blue flame and flying out of the agency building.

Outside. Behind the agency building on a tree-lined road. The vast, dark blue night sky spreading above his head gave him a kind of relief he never would have imagined. On the other hand, Kyouko, who had waited, ordered Hakuou and Kokfuu to shut the side door. Suzuka immediately formed a seal, blocking it with a barrier.

Yukikaze shook its body, snorting while turning to let the people on it drop to the road. Kyouko exhaustedly put her hands on her knees, and Suzuka sighed deeply.

"Sorry for the wait, I've brought back our captured princess just as planned."

Touji grinned from the horse.

Then, Harutora looked at the two of them, unable to speak for a while.

"......Kyouko.....Suzuka....."

Even Harutora could imagine the two of them telling him about how reckless he had been. Once he thought of that, the things that he clearly had to say wouldn't immediately come out of his mouth.

Suzuka glared fiercely at Harutora, saying:

"......Bakatora."

Hearing this, Kyouko also looked up and smiled:

"Bakatora."

Touji made it three in a row. Kon frowned and Harutora smiled bitterly.

Then, after they noticed, searched for the 'other person', but.....

"Don't move!"

Harutora and the others suddenly flinched.

They were Onmyouji wearing miasma protecting clothing, releasing their stealth as if to warn them. They already surrounded them, trapping them against the agency building, and chanting incantations. Beams of light like aurora connected the exorcists, sealing Harutora and the others inside.

The Eight-Point Barrier, a first-class magic used to combat spiritual disasters.

...Damn! Already!?"

The spiritual disaster purification team would be arriving soon. He had momentarily forgotten what Yashamaru said.

The exorcists were serious. Because the office of the Onmyouji, the Onmyou Agency, had been attacked. Even if Harutora and the others looked to be underage, they couldn't be permitted leniency in this kind of situation. The Eight-Point Barrier was proof of that.

"Damn..... Suzuka!?'

"No good! The Eight-Point Barrier is the highest level sealing barrier of General Onmyoudou - we can't break it from the inside!"

Suzuka loudly replied to Touji's question. Come to think of it, Harutora had once seen Suzuka imprisoned inside the Eight-Point Barrier. At the time, Suzuka had brought out the 'Armored Juggernaut' and broken the barrier from the outside. But

right now, they were completely helpless and it seemed that this time she had no other measures prepared.

...In this kind of place.....!?

If they were captured by the spiritual disaster purification team right now, they would be back to square one. No, Touji and the others' positions would become even more perilous. Of course, it would become another reason for him to be helplessly thrown into prison. He definitely couldn't stop now, when he had decided to resurrect Natsume.

"Listen up! Resistance will absolutely not be tolerated! Cooperate!"

...What should they do!?

He angrily gritted his teeth at the exorcists while desperately thinking of countermeasures. However, Harutora, along with Touji and the others, couldn't think of any. It was over - Right as they thought that.

Crash. A high-pitched, crisp sound rang out above their heads.

The sound of shattering glass and a barrier being broken. Then, an overlapping scream. It sounded like a very familiar scream.

"Waaaaaaah!?"

In Harutora's vision as he inadvertently looked up were shining golden particles of light that spilled forth. Black wings that seemed to be formed from the essence of the dark night leisurely dancing through the night sky. Breaking through the agency building glass and suddenly breaking the barrier was--

"The Raven's Wing!?"

Moreover, it was carrying something with its legs - no, it was carrying a person. Harutora - along with Touji, Kyouko, Suzuka, and the others - were all dumbfounded.

It was Tenma.

Then, after appearing in the night sky, the Raven's Wing - the yatagarasu - rapidly dove towards them as if paying no heed to the human it was carrying.

Its target was one of the exorcists casting the Eight-Point Barrier. That Exorcist was maintaining the barrier while taking a stance to respond to the shikigami above its head in a panic. However, the yatagarasu spread its wings and quickly stopped right before it hit him. Its spread wings whipped up a strong wind.

The wind became a whirling tornado. Moreover, that tornado carried an intense magical energy.

"Guaah!?"

The exorcists was blown flying with no way to resist and a weak point appeared in the Eight-Point Barrier. Suzuka wouldn't be Suzuka if she missed that. She reflexively threw out a water-element charm.

"Order!"

The charm hurled by the 'Child Prodigy' birthed a roaring torrent, blasting open the weak point of the barrier and collapsing on the exorcists that surrounded them. The

Eight-Point Barrier completely broke down. Harutora swung Yukikaze's reins. "Go!' Touji shouted loudly at the other two. Suzuka responded by summoning a paper shikigami.

"Kyouko!"

She pulled Kyouko's hand and the two of them jumped on the bird of prey shikigami that was born.

Even though the torrent was collapsing on them, the exorcists yelled out loudly. "Stop!" Their professional spirit and perseverance was admirable, but that wouldn't stop them. Yukikaze charged into the night sky. Kon chased her master as he rode the white horse, and Suzuka and Kyouko's shikigami followed behind.

The yatagarasu whipped up wind again, making Suzuka's torrent froth. They escaped into the night sky, leaving the swirling magical energy and the agency building below them.

Kurahashi headed to the depths of the Onmyou Agency. He was in the 'nonexistent' fourth underground floor that couldn't be reached by the elevator.

The dark side of the Onmyou Agency, unbeknownst to the public. It was a cursed prison where 'important' magical criminals were imprisoned, the secret of its existence was only passed down from generation to generation among a few select elites.

But when he reached the fourth underground floor, Kurahashi couldn't help but groan. The unbreakable door that had been sealed by multiple impenetrable barriers was destroyed. Half of it was peeled off and shamefully bent off its hinges.

The barriers here, all sealing barriers without exception, were designed be effective against forces on the inside. They weren't ineffective against disruption from the outside - but they were unexpectedly weak to physical attacks like this.

Kurahashi crossed the shimenawa that had been roughly cut to pieces and entered inside.

The interior had an abnormal smell of mildew, vomit, feces, urine, and blood that couldn't be removed with any washing. The scattered incense that burned as if to mask it intensified the odor instead.

The inorganic corridor lit by ancient lights was damaged everywhere. Kurahashi's expression became even more sinister.

He quickly walked into the depths. Then, he stopped before his target room. That room's door was open wide. The culprits who had destroyed the entrance and ravaged the underground were in the center of the room.

Two of Doman's shikigami. It looked like they had even invaded this far. Coincidentally - no, if it were Doman, it wouldn't be strange even if he knew about the prison hidden in the agency building. Then, seeing as how he had worked with Ohtomo, his target should have been Harutora. He had instructed the shikigami to search for places that could serve as 'prisons' for Harutora. There was a possibility.

"......I've failed."

Doman's left behind shikigami leaped up happily, viewing Kurahashi as prey and attacking him with shrieks.

But.

"**曩莫 三**满多勃陀喃 **阿毗**罗唵欠."

He chanted Mahavairocana's mantra without even putting his hands together, instantly eliminating the two shikigami.

The room was empty after the shikigami vanished. He couldn't see the man who had originally been sealed inside here anywhere. And more importantly, the curse placed on this room had disappeared. It hadn't been the shikigami from just now. It had been released even earlier.

Kurahashi ground his teeth.

".....How naive, Miyachi."

Those words also admitted his own mistake. But this wasn't a decisive error. Kurahashi spun around with a stern face.

This happened about ten minutes before Kurahashi visited the room.

Doman's shikigami were essentially autonomous. They were created with strong offensive capabilities out of necessity for use, but some were capable of low level reasoning, and this allowed them to somewhat adapt their master's orders.

The order the shikigami had been originally given was to destroy and cause chaos without killing, as well as to search and capture. Also, they expected their search target to be imprisoned, and they had been instructed with several particularly important locations to investigate. The underground prison was one of those designated areas, as Kurahashi had expected.

When they had first broken into the agency building, one of the many groups that the shikigami split into was immediately assigned to search the underground prison. They searched for the concealed entrance, destroyed the barrier, and entered. Then, they encountered a man who had been imprisoned.

The man wasn't their search target. Moreover, he wasn't even a practitioner. No, more accurately, the man's magical ability had been completely sealed and stolen away. He was also physically weak, so much that he could no longer stand with his own strength.

There was just that one man in this prison. The shikigami began diligently destroying the surroundings, and the shikigami that were satisfied with that returned aboveground. But among the shikigami that did as they pleased, one took an interest in the man.

According to its master Doman's intent, taking lives was forbidden - for now. However, he could 'play' with this practitioner as an opponent. Though the imprisoned man had currently lost his strength, he was still a practitioner, right? Couldn't he play with him?

This shikigami possessed some ability to reason. But it couldn't make a decision on this. So, the shikigami decided to bring the man to their master and ask for a verdict. It threw the man's weak body over its shoulder and left the underground prison.

The man was carried on the shikigami's shoulder. Never mind resistance, he was carried away without even being able to talk.

But at that time, he was clearly smiling rebelliously.

Part 4

Though they had escaped the exorcists, it was just a matter of time. Spiritual disaster purification teams would spread out from the agency building soon. Yukikaze could only rise ten meters above the ground. It wouldn't be strange for a fugitive flying in the night sky on a white horse to be spotted at any time.

"Hey, Harutora."

"Yeah, let's descend for now!"

Since they looked particularly conspicuous in the sky, they landed in a dark, wooded park. Harutora and the others had Yukikaze lead the way as they passed through the trees, rapidly dropping into the park. Suzuka even put up a people-repelling barrier. But putting up a barrier would itself attract the exorcists' attention. Even if she carefully kept her magical energy to a minimum, it would be best not to stay for a long time.

First off, Harutora wasn't preparing to hide for a long time.

Touji switched his seal back on. He hopped off Yukikaze as he returned to his normal state. Harutora followed as well. Kon stayed a bit distant from her master, staying alert of their surroundings. In that time, Suzuka also jumped off her shikigami. Kyouko, who rode with her, was a bit shaky from flying in the sky on a shikigami. She borrowed Suzuka's hand to finally get off the shikigami.

Then was Tenma.

"Hey, hey, Tenma? Are you alright?"

Tenma was dropped to the ground by the yatagarasu - quite roughly. He slumped limply on the ground as if startled, at a loss. His glasses almost fell off, but it was actually a miracle that they hadn't fallen off from being tossed around like that.

He managed to turn his head and reply to Harutora's call. "......H-Harutora-kun....."

In any case, he didn't look hurt. Maybe the Raven's Wing hadn't treated Tenma like luggage, and maybe it had used a barrier or some other means to protect Tenma during the flight.

Then, the Raven's Wing beat its wings again after dropping Tenma and sat on a tree branch nearby. It stared at them. Was it waiting for its master's instruction, or trying to identify its master? Though the number of legs and eye color were different, it looked no different from a giant raven when it was perched on a tree branch like that. But the aura it gave off really was overwhelming. The spiritual pressure that could be felt from it made one think of Natsume's servant shikigami Hokuto.

Suzuka muttered and gulped as she looked up, and then lowered her gaze and glared at Tenma.

"......Hey..... hey, Glasses! You, what's going on!? Why is the Raven's Wing with you - didn't the Exorcist Bureau seize it? Even if was moved to the Onmyou Agency, it should have been sealed tightly, right? Why is it--"

Suzuka's words gradually gained in speed and in the end she shouted with a red face.

"A-Also, why are you here!? You didn't come to the meeting place! And you're with the Raven's Wing - W-What's going on!?"

Harutora was taken aback when he heard Suzuka's words. He had thought they had definitely all been moving together. But thinking carefully, it was strange that only Tenma had acted otherwise. After all, Tenma was the worst at first-class magic among them.

On the other hand, Tenma came to his senses because of Suzuka's questioning. "Right" He jumped up and faced Harutora before explaining.

"Harutora-kun. I have a message for you."

"M-Message? From who--"

"From Saotome Suzu-san."

Harutora along with the other three doubted their ears. "Hey, hey, Tenma." Touji spoke in confusion, but Tenma stared straight at Harutora, not moving his gaze. The intensity of his expression told them that it wasn't a lie or a joke.

"Harutora-kun, she said this. If you're preparing to challenge the Taizan Fukun Ritual..... she'll lend a hand. She said that she was waiting for you there."

"Wh--!"

Why - Harutora was unable to say it. The other three who heard this were the same. After all, Harutora had only decided to resurrect Natsume with his own hands when Kon had persuaded him in the executive office just earlier. Until then, it had been unimaginable that he would challenge the Taizan Fukun Ritual.

Tenma nodded deeply at the stunned Harutora.

"Yeah. You currently can't understand what she's talking about, right? But I met her."

"M-Met? Saotome Suzu?"

"Yeah, and she told me to bring that message. Also, she said that the Raven's Wing would be necessary for you."

"....."

What exactly was going on. Harutora inadvertently looked at the Raven's Wing that stared at them above their heads. Just like before, he couldn't read the Raven's Wing's thoughts. Moreover, he didn't even know whether it was a sentient thing.

"......H-Hold on, Tenma. So you're saying you obtained the Raven's Wing alone? After breaking into the agency building? During all that?"

"Kyouko-chan, that doesn't matter right now."

Tenma frowned and spoke to Kyouko who had inadvertently started asking questions from the side. Suzuka seemed glued to the ground. Touji also unconsciously let out a groan.

To be honest, Harutora had the same feelings. It wasn't something that 'didn't matter', regardless of how subtle. It was because he had been with Kurahashi and the others that Harutora had realized that the Raven's Wing's release had caused the 'collapse' of the fortress Kurahashi and the others had prepared. It hadn't been Harutora, it hadn't been Touji and the others, it hadn't been Ohtomo, nor had it been Doman. It had been Tenma who got the Raven's Wing and sent the signal for a counterattack.

But Tenma didn't have the time to be worried about the reactions around him. "Harutora-kun." He calmly continued.

"Harutora-kun, tell me, what are you going to do? Are you going to resurrect Natsume-chan?"

The instant that question was raised, he felt the air around them tense up.

Kyouko's and Suzuka's expressions stiffened as they waited for Harutora's response. Touji was the same. He had brought Harutora out of the agency building after questioning his determination, but he still hadn't asked what he decided.

Then, before his friends who waited with bated breath for his answer.

"Yeah, I'm going to resurrect Natsume."

Harutora replied readily.

Tenma, who had raised the question, was the first to gnaw his lip after hearing the answer. But not long afterwards, his expression - perhaps through conscious willpower - slowly bloomed.

Then.

"......I see."

He nodded with an open-minded expression.

"But, since you're here, that means that you didn't accept the proposal of that Yashamaru shikigami that Touji mentioned?"

"Right. ...Everyone, listen to me. I'm going to resurrect Natsume with the Taizan Fukun Ritual. With my own hands. ......Of course, I'm not sure how to use the Taizan Fukun Ritual. Even if they say I'm Yakou's reincarnation, I don't understand at all. But..... I've decided. This is how I'll repay Natsume."

Harutora looked at his friends after he said this. Touji's expression was serious. Kyouko's lips were taut and her eyes were wide. Suzuka's eyes were red and her body trembled.

Harutora smiled at the three of them. Then, he noticed.

He had experienced endless despair after Natsume's death. However, he was able to smile like this again. He was able to show his friends a smile. The words Kon said might have been correct. Maybe Natsume's smile also waited ahead of him.

Next, it was Harutora's turn to question Tenma.

"Hey, Tenma. That Saotome person, did she know I would make that choice? Is that why she'll help with the Taizan Fukun Ritual--"

"Maybe. But..... Harutora-kun. You should understand better than me."

"Eh?"

Harutora's face became astonished because of Tenma's strange words, and then he understood.

...As expected.

He had felt a slight premonition the first time he had heard the name 'Saotome Suzu' from Ohtomo. Then, after he thought of her expressionless face, he inadvertently grimaced. He was worried. He instantly became restless.

Then--

"H-Hold on! The Taizan Fukun Ritual's forbidden magic, right? And it's a secret ritual! Saotome Suzu was a Yakou researcher, but it's the first time I've heard that she knows about the Taizan Fukun Ritual, you know? First off, how do you even know we can trust that Saotome person more than the Onmyou Agency!?"

It was Suzuka who made this rebuttal. What she said was right, but her voice and expression reflected the girl's emotions more than her thoughts.

"......Suzuka. I heard from Natsume. The 'one-armed oni' that stopped me from going out of control left Natsume with the advice 'Ask Saotome Suzu for help if there's an emergency'."

"S-Still! We might not necessarily be able to trust that oni either!"

"That's true, but I'd much rather choose that oni and 'senpai' over taking Yashamaru's hand."

Maybe those were somewhat cunning words. Because it had been Suzuka who proclaimed Yashamaru's danger the loudest. Suzuka couldn't make a very strong rebuttal if he used those words.

She said in a whimper:

"D-Didn't Natsumecchi say as well. Back then with me. S-She said that soul magic was a territory that humans weren't supposed to tread....."

"......Indeed."

"Even though she said..... Even though she said.....!"

"I really don't think I'm worthy of being a shikigami. Natsume will probably complain angrily after this."

Harutora gently replied to Suzuka's protest. Forced back by his expression rather than his words, Suzuka closed her mouth and hung her head.

Touji quietly stared at Harutora without saying a word.

Kyouko seemed like she really wanted to say something, but wore an expression of not knowing what to say.

Then, Tenma said:

"......Harutora-kun. Saotome-san said this. She said don't fear the Raven's Wing but don't be consumed by it either. Though I don't really understand what it means, I share your opinion. Maybe as expected of one of Ohtomo-sensei's classmates, that person's also weird..... But just like Ohtomo-sensei, she feels very trustworthy."

After saying this, Tenma smiled and apologized "Sorry for saying that without any evidence at all." A sad smile, yet kind-hearted, just like him.

Harutora turned his head to the side, looking up at the silhouette of the Raven's Wing perched on the tree branch.

Natsume had died because of the magic of the Raven's Wing when it had been entwined around Harutora's body. That was the harsh 'truth'. Just like Kon said, although he understood that that was an action Natsume herself had desired and not

the Raven's Wing, as expected he still emotionally disliked the Raven's Wing. He detested it.

At that time, Harutora and the Raven's Wing hadn't been in their normal conditions. Natsume had set things right. Hence, he had lived on. Because of Natsume's desire, he and the Raven's Wing had returned to their original states. That was probably also a 'truth'.

Saotome seemed to be 'waiting there'.

Where?

That kind of thing he could instantly realize after thinking for only a moment.

"...Touji, Kyouko, Suzuka, Tenma."

After Harutora gazed at each of their faces, he spoke clearly.

"I'm going."

No one stopped him. Each of Harutora's dear friends now held their own attitude, but they weren't prepared to stop him again.

That was just how Harutora's 'friends' were.

But.

"......Sorry, but no."

"H-Harutora-sama!" Kon, staying alert to the surroundings, gave a delayed warning as her ears and tail stood up. Yukikaze neighed. Harutora and the others took stances, shooting their gazes towards the direction of the voice.

A man entered the park that originally should have had a people-repelling barrier cast on it.

A young man with an eagle-eyed gaze and whose body was intertwined with a sharp aura. He had a highly-trained air and a katana on his waist that seemed like a part of his body. The at-ease and reliable expression from several hours ago now seemed tense as if he were another person.

Independent Exorcist Kogure Zenjirou.

But was this the same Kogure? Harutora and the others held their breath because of the solemn, mighty sense of presence.

".....No matter what reasons you have, I can't stay silent if a practitioner is about to taint their hands with forbidden magic. I'll capture you all. Harutora-kun, Touji-kun, Tenma-kun, Kyouko-chan and Suzuka. ...Listen up, your selfishness stops here."

Harutora's hair stood on their ends.

Kogure had a 'serious intent' that had never appeared on Kurahashi and that he had never felt from Yashamaru. A strength that would make the opponent surrender without a word. A whole different power than magical energy and aura.

How would it be if the customarily cordial and reliable adult seriously wielded his strength?

Kogure showed them an intense 'will' that the mere thought of it made them cower. To Harutora and the others, this was something instinctively difficult to resist.

But what Kogure was conscious of before him wasn't actually Harutora and the others.

"Of course....."

Kogure's confirmation was aimed behind Harutora and the others' backs.

"Even your homeroom teacher would agree, right? Right, Jin?"

Harutora and the others simultaneously turned around in surprise.

The darkness of the park at night, surrounded by the people-repelling barrier.

Thunk. In the middle of that came a crisp sound as Ohtomo's figure appeared. His expression was tinted with bitter and entangled colors that the students were seeing for the first time.

Kogure Zenjirou and Ohtomo Jin quietly confronted each other across Harutora and the others.

Harutora and the others were bound by tension, rooted in place. Needless to say, Kyouko was the same. But Kyouko also felt a mysterious sense of apprehension unrelated to the confrontation.

An apprehension she had felt in the lounge of the Exorcist Bureau and behind the agency building when she had said 'wait' to Touji and Suzuka. Right now, it was trying to resurface for the third time. No, it was even more serious than before. She had the feeling from somewhere that if she let go, her consciousness would immediately dissociate from her body and she would fly into the distance. She was losing control her body. Her body and mind were splitting apart. She had that kind of strange impression.

...What's going on!?

Right now was clearly not the time for this. Kyouko desperately stabilized her aura while pulling her consciousness back to the scene before her.

Kogure and Ohtomo were former coworkers in the Onmyou Agency. Their relationship had continued since their time in the Onmyou Academy. Come to think of it, although she had never seen the two speaking directly, according to what they said about each other, it could be seen that the two had quite a close relationship.

It definitely wasn't collusion, but it was certainly the proof of a deep trust. Even after becoming adults and after their occupations changed, their relationship hadn't changed. That kind of old relationship was beautiful and admirable.

However, now, Kogure and Ohtomo were revealing a grim side that Kyouko and the others didn't know about and were facing each other with a paralyzing feeling of tension.

Their voices weren't rough, nor did they show anger. In comparison, the two seemed calm and composed.

But the atmospheres the two gave off turned into astounding pressure, making them feel like they were being crushed. That pressure was as if the entire park were submerged under a deep sea.

But their atmospheres weren't equal. That was also reflected on the expressions of the two.

Wearing the katana as part of his body, Kogure's expression was sharp and resolute. He didn't have a shred of hesitation.

In comparison, Ohtomo was currently hesitating. Perhaps he had heard Harutora's words just now. He had learned of Harutora's determination and of the actions he had chosen after resolving his confusion.

"Jin."

Kogure spoke with a composed, unwavering tone as if stepping out and slashing forward.

"The agency building. You were the one who brought Ashiya Doman there."

He wasn't asking, nor was he confirming. Unable to immediately understand what he meant, Kyouko looked at Ohtomo - and became certain that Kogure's accusation was the truth.

"It was a feint very like you. You're merciless in the end. Was your goal to take back Harutora-kun? Do you have so little trust in the agency?"

"....."

Kogure's expression towards the silent Ohtomo suddenly softened.

"Anyway, you hid it from me out of consideration for my position, right? You would free your student and then become wanted, and everything would be resolved, right? You're as maddeningly considerate of others as always."

"......That's how I am."

Ohtomo finally opened his mouth. Though he had his usual sour tone, it wasn't his normal elusive attitude.

Kogure stared at Ohtomo with narrowed eyes and then suddenly turned his gaze to Harutora.

"Harutora-kun." He spoke without politeness to the tensed Harutora.

"Forbidden magic is magic that's not limited to yourself. It's a game you play that bets 'part of the world'."

"......A game?"

"Yeah, you might be repaid greatly if you win, but the price isn't just limited to a burden for the practitioner if you lose. Completely unrelated people - not just the participants and observers of the game, even people who you don't even know of - will easily be dragged in."

Then, Kogure glanced at Ohtomo.

"For example, though saying this might make him unhappy, your homeroom teacher is a 'forbidden magic specialist'. In the past, he secretly performed the dirty work during secret missions for the Onmyou Agency Mystical Investigators. He used forbidden magic hundreds of times. That's why he completely understands the terror of forbidden magic."

After he said that, "Isn't that right, Jin?" Kogure asked Ohtomo, still suppressing his emotions.

"You understand how much damage the Onmyou Agency sustained tonight, right? It wasn't a pure question of money. You know how deep of an effect it will have on our work tomorrow and how many people will be impacted by that result. It's not just the agency members. The people the Onmyou Agency ought to help, the people relying on the Onmyou Agency, will suffer the same loss. You couldn't possibly have not considered those things when you instigated Ashiya Doman. You knew, but you did it. For your own goals. Isn't that right?"

In contrast to the contents of those words, it didn't sound like Kogure was reproaching Ohtomo. He was just simply confirming. Ohtomo didn't seem ashamed by this either, and he wordlessly affirmed Kogure's accusation. Just watching the two of them gradually made Kyouko's limbs feel paralyzed.

"That's what it is to use forbidden magic."

Kogure turned to Harutora again, continuing.

"But, you know what? Sometimes that thinking is necessary. Times when you have to act on behalf of 'part of the world'. Like when you act for the Onmyou Agency - no, when you act for the 'interests of the entire industry' as a 'regulator of the magic

community'. That's why the Onmyou Agency quietly accepted the people who used forbidden magic in the past. But..... what about you, Harutora-kun?"

Kogure calmly pressed the question to Harutora. No, it wasn't just Harutora. Touji, Suzuka, Tenma, and Kyouko were unable to rebut the ideals Kogure supported.

...Forbidden magic.....

Kyouko wasn't familiar with the phrase, and it was magic. Of course, she hadn't thought so deeply about forbidden magic before. She didn't use it because it was forbidden. She didn't investigate it or hold any interest in it. She just accepted the meaning of the label 'forbidden'.

However.

She looked up at the Raven's Wing perched on a branch above their heads. Come to think of it, this Raven's Wing was also designated as forbidden magic. Would being associated with this for no good reason expose part of the world to danger? Had Natsume died because they had lost that game?

But.....

"Jin. Let me take care of these kids. I definitely won't hand them over no matter what the agency says. Even if it's an order from the Chief and the Director. Is that alright?"

After Kogure proclaimed this, he started slowly refining the aura over his entire body. He did it showily in front of Harutora and the others.

"I won't ask for help. But don't intervene."

He slowly walked forward after firmly saying that.

Kon immediately pulled out her blade. Yukikaze cautiously stamped his hooves. In addition to the shikigami, Harutora and the other students readied their stances. But they actually had expressions of confusion.

Kyouko couldn't help but look pleadingly at Ohtomo.

Ohtomo stared motionlessly at Kogure with an expression that had never been more frightening. Tangled emotions had clearly emerged on his elusive, poker-faced self. Ohtomo had wanted to save his students even if he had to provoke the Onmyou Agency. Even if Kogure was his opponent, even if he hesitated, he wouldn't just sit still. In other words, Ohtomo couldn't approve of Harutora using the Taizan Fukun Ritual either.

But..... it was obvious if he thought carefully.

Reviving the dead.

There were many forbidden magics in the world, but the others were less 'taboo'.

".....Let me say something else, my personal opinion. Even if you win this game, forbidden magic will ruin you in the end. In other words, it's a 'poison'. You might not be able to see it, and you might not be able to realize it for a while - but forbidden magic will gradually corrupt the practitioner who uses it. It corrupts you to the core. Your homeroom teacher isn't intervening because he understands that."

Kogure put his hand on the hilt of his katana.

"Listen to me!"

The final ultimatum.

What Kogure said was probably correct. What Harutora was preparing to do was a mistake. Kogure's words had substance, and Harutora was just acting off desires. What Kogure did was deeply rooted, and what Harutora was trying to do was a beautiful illusion like mist.

Natsume was dead. That was already a truth they could do nothing about, hence reality. They couldn't overturn it.

Ever.

Just then--

"!?"

Suddenly, she was assaulted by an indescribable impulse as if she had been struck by lightning. Her vision shook and darkened, and she began moving far away in a flash.

It was a creepy feeling like anemia - and moreover, it was as if all the blood had been instantly drained from her body. Dizziness, nausea, chills, and terror rampaged through Kyouko's nerves.

The world around her tilted and she was pushed out of the twisted world. Her soul left the current world and was thrown into some different place.

This was a phenomenon far surpassing what Kyouko's mind could comprehend.

Then--

Before she noticed, Momoe Tenma's face was in front of her. Kyouko-chan, he loudly called. Then, Momoe Tenma managed to catch Kurahashi Kyouko when she collapsed. Huh, Kyouko thought. For some reason, reality felt incongruous.

She could see the universe.

The world - the scene before her - overlapped with the universe.

"Kyouko!" Tsuchimikado Harutora called out in shock. Ato Touji and Dairenji Suzuka looked at Kurahashi Kyouko in a seeming panic. Kurahashi Kyouko had an expression as if she were in a dream, with her gaze that wouldn't focus wandering through nowhere. Kyouko couldn't understand what had happened to her at all.

She desperately turned her consciousness to her surroundings. She stared at the universe overlapping the world.

The howling sound of wind came from somewhere. A wind passing through the vacuum of the universe. The things she saw were hard to describe. Moreover, Kurahashi Kyouko's thoughts felt dissociated, like they belonged to someone else.

Had her soul left her body? Though she thought so, it didn't seem right. Maybe..... it was. It felt a little like she had 'diverged' from her original world. A feeling as if she had strayed into a different dimension. No, of course that wasn't right, but Kyouko's consciousness couldn't make any better deductions.

Then--

The dim light that she had seen in the Exorcist Bureau lounge shone above Momoe Tenma's head.

It wasn't just Momoe Tenma. It was also above Dairenji Suzuka. She could also see it on the others. She didn't miss them. She could see the same kind of light above Kogure Zenjirou's head as he stared in shock and above Ohtomo Jin's head as he was frozen in place stunned. The one who was different was Ato Touji. Compared to the others, the light above his head was difficult to see clearly. It wasn't because the light was weak, but rather because he was covered by something like dim moonlight. Something - right, it was demonic aura.

Ah. In that moment, Kyouko realized.

In this world overlapped by the universe, light shone over everyone's head, sparkling like 'stars'. The stars bore deep depth that connected to the future.

Right now, she was reading the stars.

Kyouko turned her gaze to Tsuchimikado Harutora. She looked clearly at the stars sparkling above Tsuchimikado Harutora's head.

But there wasn't just one light there. Different stars unlike Harutora's stars were sparkling almost surreptitiously. It wasn't just now. It was even farther forward. In the future.

Then, she understood.

Kyouko understood just a part of the 'world' she was in right now.

"Just a part of the current 'world'."

Kyouko spoke.

The boundaries of forbidden magic were things decided by humans.

"The boundaries of forbidden magic are things decided by humans."

Kyouko spoke.

Forbidden magic was the same.

"Forbidden magic is the same."

Then, Kurahashi Kyouko slowly moved her gaze that hovered in midair, focusing it on Tsuchimikado Harutora's body. Tsuchimikado Harutora and Kurahashi Kyouko's eyes met. Kurahashi Kyouko stared at Tsuchimikado Harutora as Kyouko read Harutora's star.

Harutora's stars.

Along with Natsume's star.

Then, a growing force entered the roaring universe. An astoundingly powerful gust of wind. As the world began tilting again, Kyouko did all she could to stay stable while shouting 'Harutora'.

"Harutora!"

Kurahashi Kyouko cried.

"It's alright. I can see Natsume-chan's star. Natsume-chan's waiting for you."

So.

"......Go....."

Ending with those words, Kyouko dropped her gaze and lost consciousness.

Kogure only knew one type of 'power' that was like the one absolutely dominating the scene right now. A feeling of something surpassing his own will ferociously kicking him back.

Prophesying.

But this wasn't prophesying. This was.....

...Could it be 'divination'!?

The talent of 'divination' was a god-gifted talent like spirit-seeing. It could be extended through training after being acquired, but people who never had the talent couldn't use it. Moreover, the number of people possessing this ability was far fewer than even spirit-seeing.

But Kyouko - Kurahashi Kyouko - was the granddaughter of the Onmyou Academy principal, Kurahashi Miyo. And Principal Kurahashi had been lauded as one of the best 'diviners' of the 'Kurahashi diviner', a great family of magic. It was said that even Tsuchimikado Yakou paid attention to her 'divining' ability and had placed her by his side.

Then.

...Could it be? Kyouko-kun is a diviner.....!?

More importantly, her words from before seemed like a prophecy. Kyouko had indeed said so.

She said she had seen Natsume's star.

She said Natsume was waiting for Harutora.

That meant..... but, that.....

Just then.

Hahaha. A loud laugh rang through the nighttime park. A cheerful, dissonant laugh as if he had been possessed. A chill instantly ran through Kogure's spine.

"My, oh my, how incredible. My class is really full of problem children."

"Jin! Stop!"

"Sorry, Zenjirou."

Right afterwards, Kogure's vision was filled with charms.

He immediately put up a barrier - but the charms didn't let the charm magic activate as they surrounded him. They spun, overlapped, moved, and danced.

A huge number of charms filled the air. How had he produced this many charms - wait, he was wrong. That wasn't it. He had been blind. It was an illusion. He momentarily slipped-up when his attention had been stolen by Kyouko. Ohtomo had been taught his illusion skills directly by the 'Divine Fan'. Dispelling the illusion was difficult once he was taken by surprise.

"...Damn!"

Kogure instantly put his hands together in a dhyana mudra. The sanskrit character 'अ' appeared in his mind and he cleansed the aura in his body in a flash. He used the meditation method known as Ajikan to break the external magical interference.

Soon, the charms filling his surroundings vanished like clearing fog. However, by then Harutora and Touji had already jumped on the white horse shikigami, and Suzuka had taken flight with her bird of prey paper shikigami.

His right hand instantly shot to the hilt of his sword, but--

"Om bishibishi karakara shibari sowaka!"

"Tch!"

He was too slow to respond. He leaped to the side to escape the effective range of the Unmoving Golden Chains while forcefully swinging his sword as he fell. He infused the blade with magical energy, slashing at the white horse carrying the two - while immediately controlling his strength.

The slash of magical energy from far away rushed towards Harutora and the others. Kogure's blade was the divine 'Demon Sword' that had been guarded by the great tengu Tarobo of Atago. And Kogure was the divine blade user known as the 'Heavenly Sword'. Though he had more or less held back on that slash, it definitely wasn't something that students could defend against unprepared.

But the Raven's Wing blocked it.

"...Ugh!?"

The blade of magical energy rushed towards Harutora and the others. The black wings that had risen from the branch at some point swayed with golden particles of light and glided in front of the blade. Its movements were leisurely yet graceful, not hurried at all, but they were in time for Kogure's slash and deflected it.

Kogure recovered from his imbalanced posture and leaped forward, but at that time Ohtomo's charm had already reached him. On the other side of the charm that repelled him, Touji grabbed the reins and swung his arms.

The white horse leaped up into the night sky, and Harutora's defensive shikigami girl flew following behind them.

Harutora turned his head on the horse.

"Tenma! Take Kyouko--"

"I know! Hurry up and go!"

As Tenma nodded, Harutora called for the yatagarasu. "Raven's Wing!" The yatagarasu that had blocked Kogure's slash spread its wings and rose up.

...It still wasn't over.

Cutting apart the charm magic and glaring upwards, Kogure groped for another way.

As Kogure thought--

"Ahem."

An empty cough that wasn't even magic distracted Kogure, disrupting his focus.

Strange. Such simple means - but no one was better at grasping the subtleties of the situation and controlling them as well as Kogure's old friend. He had been frighteningly clever since long ago.

Now he would only be able to entrust it to his shikigami.

But more than that, right now--

"......Jin. You bastard....."

He stared at Ohtomo with unconcealed anger.

Ohtomo had a calm and undisturbed attitude - no, his expression was uncharacteristically serious - as he endured his old friend's indignant gaze.

"......To be honest, I never thought being a teacher would be so tiring."

"Are you out of your mind!?"

"Indeed....."

Ohtomo's lips curved.

"Maybe I'm wrong, but this is what I've chosen."

Kogure couldn't help but click his tongue. But he forcefully suppressed his overflowing anxiety. Right now was the occasion to act without listening to his emotions. He must complete task, no matter how difficult it was.

"Jin."

Kogure announced with a harsh voice.

"I won't concede. Move aside."

"Zenjirou."

A bitter smile surfaced on Ohtomo's face.

"Sorry, but I can't do that."

Part 5

"What should we do!?"

Touji, who was on the horse again, questioned Harutora who sat next to him as the wind rushed past.

Since Kogure had appeared, the spiritual disaster purification team would probably be contacted very soon. Harutora and the others had become fugitives. Then it was a matter of time until they showed up.

"We'll take back Natsume. Then, we'll go to where Suzu-senpai is."

"Alright. Then first to the Exorcist Bureau headquarters. Our second break-in of the night."

Touji's voice was very happy. Without a doubt, Touji had already prepared himself to abide by Harutora's decision, but just like Ohtomo, he had a desire to cast away his hesitation and his troubles.

Kon flew next to Yukikaze, her ears and tail fluttering in the wind. Slightly farther was Suzuka's shikigami as well. And also the Raven's Wing. Though the yatagarasu had pulled away from Harutora and the others, it definitely wasn't trying to leave them.

He could only trust it now. He didn't know how much Saotome would help them out, but he didn't believe they would be able to entrust everything to her. In the end, he could only rely on himself to challenge the Taizan Fukun Ritual. Perhaps he would require the strength of the Raven's Wing for that.

Harutora and the Raven's Wing had both been saved by Natsume.

This time, it now fell to Harutora and the Raven's Wing to join together and rescue Natsume.

"H-Harutora-sama!"

Suddenly, Kon caught their attention. Right afterwards, the caws of crows poured forth.

"Wha!?"

From the front, from behind, from the left and right, and also from above and below. The caws coming from every direction resounded, bouncing off each other and becoming more chaotic. There was magical energy in the sound. It was magic. Yukikaze's feet thrashed, but Touji inadvertently released the reins to cover his ears. Though Harutora also screamed, he couldn't even hear his voice.

...This was!?

Flap. Four crows cut through the dark night and flew by, surrounding Yukikaze from four directions. Crows - no, that was wrong. Though their heads and wings were like crows, they wore miasma protection clothing on the rest of their small body. They were the crow tengu that Kogure used. Kokuryuu and Dasai. Reisen and Hou'oubeiden.

"You guys!"

The crow tengu continued cawing as they surrounded Yukikaze. "You!?" Kon slashed to her right, but the crow tengu dodged like smoke. At the same time, the one from behind speedily closed the distance to Harutora.

"Harutora! You idiot!"

An angry and resentful cry.

"Listen to Zenjirou! There's still time! We'll go with you to apologize!"

Harutora and Touji knew Kogure's crow tengu. In addition, they were comrades who had fought together to purify the 'Type-Chimera' during the spiritual disaster terrorist

attack this spring. Though they had followed by their master's orders, their vibrant, good-natured selves probably hadn't expected to fight against Harutora.

But.

".....Sorry, I can't right now. Let us through - but it's no use to say that."

Regardless of what the crow tengu thought, to a shikigami the master's order was absolute.

Therefore.

"We'll win right away!"

After saying this, Harutora twisted his waist and threw a charm at the crow tengu behind him. The crow tengu keenly dodged, regaining their willpower with a particularly strong caw.

Yukikaze didn't succumb to the crows' disruption, beginning to advance again. A flash from the right. It was Kon's foxfire.

Then, from the left--

"Order!"

Suzuka attacked the crow tengu that doggedly chased Yukikaze from her bird of prey shikigami.

She slid between the crow tengu and Yukikaze, telling them without turning her head:

"Go down!"

Touji automatically pulled on the reins, twisting Yukikaze's course. Then, something shot like a bullet through the path Yukikaze had been heading in until just now. It was a vine extending from a wood-element charm on the ground.

They looked below. Below Yukikaze who galloped between buildings - large vehicles were speeding along the road. The transports of the spiritual disaster purification teams. The hatches on the roofs were opened, exorcists stuck their upper bodies out and were looking up at Yukikaze and the others in the air.

They had finally been spotted. Reinforcements would be coming enmass after this. Harutora had to shake every single one of them off as he headed to the Exorcist Bureau.

"...Hey, Suzuka! You and I will be bait and let Harutora escape, alright?"

"Touji!?"

"Shut up. You still have a heap of things to do afterwards."

He spoke in a tone permitting no protest. Also, though he said they would 'let him escape', it wasn't as easy as he said. The crow tengu were focused on him. "Suzuka!" Touji shouted again, making Yukikaze draw near Suzuka's shikigami.

"Circle back to throw off the tengu and use that opportunity to entrust Harutora to the Raven's Wing. I'll stop the exorcists below, and you divert the tengus' attention by making a simple shikigami to substitute for Harutora!"

"....."

"Suzuka!"

Suzuka stubbornly gritted her teeth, not turning her face towards Harutora and Touji. Tears welled in her reddened eyes underneath her windswept bangs.

She still had yet to agree. She couldn't make her decision.

"...Suzuka." Harutora leaned forward, stopping Touji who prepared to yell out again.

"I'll bring Natsume back, so--"

Harutora spoke to Suzuka gently and emotionally. Suzuka shut her eyes, violently shaking her head and scattering her overflowing tears.

Glittering tears floated into the wind.

Then, she looked up and said:

"Bakatora!"

Suzuka stared straight at Harutora.

"If you die in place of Natsumecchi, I'll die to resurrect you!"

He might not ever be able to forget Suzuka's expression at that moment for his life. "Yeah." Harutora replied tearfully.

"I'll definitely come back, so wait for me."

A heroic smile emerged on Touji's face. "Let's go, on three!" He raised Yukikaze's speed.

"Kon!" Harutora shouted, and Kon released her materialization according to her master's order.

Suzuka gripped charms.

"Two!"

Yukikaze sped up again. The crow tengu ahead were forced to move aside and turned to pursue with beaks clenched.

"One!"

Charms flew out of the transport vehicles below them, but Yukikaze's speed brushed aside the magic that activated one after another. Harutora shot a glance at the Raven's Wing amidst the strong wind. The Raven's Wing that had watched silently before responded to Harutora's gaze, changing its trajectory.

"Zero!"

Touji forcefully pulled Yukikaze's reins.

Yukikaze turned sharply to the right, and the crow tengu that approached from the right was taken by surprise, dodging in a panic. Suzuka's charm magic exploded before it spun behind them to chase. When the screeching sound of brakes came from the transport vehicles below, Touji released a water-element charm. On the other hand, Yukikaze turned to the right sharply and leaped over a roof, its hooves almost crashing into the building wall.

Yukikaze rushed past the building's roof, and before the crow tengu caught up to it, went through the road on the other side of the building.

Harutora stood on the saddle, shouting "I'm going!" and leapt. Suzuka immediately threw a charm that became a simple shikigami substitute behind Touji.

Harutora shouted after he jumped into the air:

"Raven's Wing!"

The yatagarasu rapidly swooped into Harutora's chest. In front of Touji and Suzuka’s eyes, its figure deformed and it became multiple feathers as black as night that covered Harutora's body.

Then--

Harutora, intertwined with the Raven's Wing, tore through the night sky.

He didn't look back.

Harutora just looked forward, conveying his desire to advance. The Raven's Wing led him, its hem beating like wings as it sped straight into the night sky.

The surrounding scenery was gradually left behind them. The wind battered his ears and instantly robbed his body heat.

But his blood never stopped boiling. His heart beat intensely, driving Harutora forward from the inside.

The motions of the Raven's Wings were far more stable compared to when he had escaped from the exorcists before. It was suited to him. Even Harutora could clearly feel this. If Harutora was Tsuchimikado Yakou's reincarnation, then had he freely flown through Tokyo's night sky with the Raven's Wing wrapped around him like this in his previous life? It was a thought that seemed to make him dizzy. A thought spanning time and space.

Anyway, first was to advance. In any case, he would just move forward now.

He circled around the buildings that appeared in front of him, kicking past the billboards that jutted up and flew in the windy Kandagawa sky. Harutora just moved forward.

Towards Natsume's side.

The faces of his laboring companions continuously flashed through his mind. Touji. Suzuka. Kyouko. Tenma. And Ohtomo. Without any one of them, he wouldn't be here right now. He was able to go see Natsume like this now because they had all given their all.

Hey Yakou, Harutora thought. *Were there also people who helped you like this? Were there people who worked hard and supported you?*

If there were. If he had such companions, and Yakou had lived to repay them--

If he became Yakou instead of Harutora, maybe he wouldn't regret it. Maybe he would be able to pass the baton without regrets.

Yeah, but..... Harutora smiled.

What would Natsume think? She definitely wouldn't be pleased if he became Yakou. After all--

He saw it.

The Exorcist Bureau headquarters. Harutora dropped down in a flash. He chose a dark alley devoid of people and soundlessly floated down.

Fortunately, the exorcists of the Exorcist Bureau were currently all mobilized because of the surprise events at the Onmyou Agency. Though Touji had talked about breaking in, he would ideally slip in secretly without anyone knowing. Harutora approached the headquarters, gliding above the asphalt road.

However.

"Harutora-sama!"

Kon gave out a warning and the Raven's Wing entered a defensive state at the exact same time.

After it suddenly stopped and hardened its hem, a sharp slash assaulted Harutora. The Raven's Wing endured the magical-energy-filled blade - but was cut.

The cut Raven's Wing hem became a puff of feathers that dangled in his vision. Swinging the blade of the katana back, the 'Ogre Eater' clicked his tongue as an ominous, ferocious look surfaced on him.

"It's you, huh."

Kagami spat. Harutora swiftly retreated, pulling away from Kagami.

He glimpsed, through Kagami's eyes that were now free of his sunglasses, the intense anger and restlessness that continued to burn deep in Kagami's chest. He savagely stared at Harutora, like a wild beast thirsting for blood.

"Ah, whatever. I'll use you as bait to lure Ohtomo out."

After saying this, Kagami shouldered 'Higekiri'.

The Exorcist Bureau headquarters was in front of him on a completely silent street corner.

Harutora wrapped in the Raven's Wing faced Kagami carrying Higekiri. Sparks flew as they confronted each other.

Chapter 5 - Soul Calling

Part 1

It had already been a very long time since that day--

The beautiful moon hung in the sky.

He looked up at the moon, while sitting on the porch of the residence.

He held a cup of wine. The aromatic wine diffused in the air.

Yakou-sama. A call came from within the residence, in darkness that the moonlight hadn't reached.

Have you still not changed your mind?

He smiled bitterly and sipped from his cup in response to that question.

Then, he replied, still smiling:

"Yeah."

Then, he dropped his smile and continued:

"Sorry."

The sounds of insects that came from the courtyard indifferently and softly alleviated the silence between them.

She quietly stared at her master in the moonlight.

Then, she sat properly and slowly bowed her head.

In any case, no matter what, their time together was precious.

"Kon! I'm counting on you!"

Harutora leaped backwards, glaring at Kagami. The materialized Kon used foxfire as a fiery smokescreen, and the Raven's Wing immediately turned to escape.

But.

"Aah?"

Kagami made a dangerous sound, casually slashing out with the katana in his left hand.

The foxfire smokescreen Kon put up was dispersed by the slicing blade. Kagami extended his right hand towards Harutora, curving his ring-decorated fingers into claws.

They tore through the air, first horizontally and then vertically. Kuji-kiri. The magical energy that had been infused into his fingers passed through space, making a grid pattern emerge in front of Harutora. "Ugh!" Harutora was knocked back by the magical wall.

It was the move that had repelled the Nue's charge before. If the Raven's Wing hadn't been wrapped around him, it wouldn't have been strange if he had died in the worst case.

Kagami stared with narrowed eyes at Harutora and said:

"Don't run around. I can cut off a couple of your arms and limbs if you want."

Though he was also a Divine General, he was completely different from Kogure - but he gave off just as much of an overwhelming feeling. The indescribable feeling of being in front of a savage carnivorous beast. Harutora dropped to a knee after being knocked back by the magic grid, glaring hatefully at Kagami.

...Why did it have to be now!

Independent Exorcist Kagami Reiji. The National First-Class Onmyouji known as the 'Ogre Eater'. He had crossed paths with Harutora many times. He was the worst person to have as an enemy right now.

"You took care of 'this guy' before."

After saying this, Kagami pointed the blade at Harutora. That blade was called 'Higekiri' and was the vessel housing Kagami's servant shikigami Shaver.

Kagami was talking about the Meguro Branch incident last month. Along with the Twin-Horned Syndicate sweep operation that the Mystical Investigators had carried out, Kagami had been chosen as Natsume's guard, and he had positioned his shikigami Shaver next to Harutora and the others.

But Shaver had destroyed the magical tool that a Twin-Horned Syndicate member had brought, leading to a chain of spiritual disasters. After he had been hit with miasma and lost control, he had attacked Natsume, Harutora and the others that he had been guarding. That was the first battle to the death in the truest sense that Harutora had experienced.

"Thanks to you, his spiritual power still hasn't been able to recover. Isn't that quite cruel?"

"Don't be ridiculous! Natsume and I almost died because of that guy!"

"Was it a good lesson? I heard that you 'grew' quite a bit, Harutora? But....."

Kagami grinned mockingly.

"It seems like the 'other one' didn't learn her lesson."

"You bastard!" Kon became indignant before Harutora, the fur on her ears and tail sticking up. Needless to say, Harutora felt his blood boil just like Kon. But Harutora suppressed his angry emotions with an iron will.

Who would listen closely to the howls of a mad dog? Kagami's provocations were meaningless. What he had to do now was escape with all his might. That was all. But that wasn't anything easy to do. He had to focus completely and make his move with all his soul. He couldn’t afford to be overcome by anger.

"....."

Harutora kept staring at Kagami and rose slowly. Kagami instantly showed an intrigued expression when he saw Harutora's attitude.

"You've become a bit cleverer? .....No, that's wrong."

Of course, Kagami had already understood the reason for Harutora's determination. Though he praised the fact that he didn't respond to the provocation, his attitude became even worse afterwards.

"This isn't just 'eagerness' to become independent, is it? Do you think you've become a tengu after making a fool out of Shaver? Or are you being led on by the Raven's Wing? Do you think that as the reincarnation of a legendary Onmyouji, you can match even a Divine General as long as you have the will to?"

"....."

He wasn't an opponent that could be negotiated with. He didn't think he could take him by surprise while he was talking either. He could only fight head-on. There was no reason to win. He just needed to escape from Kagami's grasp.

"Come to think of it, I have some interest in the Raven's Wing too. As well as Tsuchimikado Yakou's reincarnation. Even though kicking you flying won't be much fun if you're just an arrogant wild dog....."

Kagami spoke coldly and then stepped forward with his leather boots. Harutora gradually wove his strategy in that time. Kon also wordlessly drew her blade, guided

by her master's fighting intent. The spiritual pressures of the two slowly rose, gradually approaching the critical point.

"Very good, come, Harutora. Just like I promised before, I'll send you flying with a kick."

That became the signal.

Harutora attacked with a blindingly fast speed, throwing charms towards Kagami. He rapidly infused magical energy into the magic that he had woven. Kagami's expression became serious once he saw those consecutive movements.

"Order!"

What he threw were protective charms. Three protective charms put up magical walls at the same time, forming a group according to their individually-woven magic and half-surrounding Kagami. At the same time, he threw charms again. This time there were five charms. Harutora rushed to the side as he watched them enclose the first magical wall again.

"....."

Swish. Kagami casually swung Higekiri without any interest.

Never mind the first magical wall, even the magical wall that had been put up afterwards was cleaved at the same time. Like a hot knife cutting butter. Kagami didn't even look at the magical wall, tracking Harutora who charged to the side with a cold look instead.

"What’s this supposed to be?"

Kagami's voice was more disappointed than contemptuous and even carried a trace of anger.

But that was Harutora's goal. To Harutora, this was the first and greatest opportunity for victory. He had gotten the 'Ogre Eater's' blind spot.

"Order!"

Magic activated as the barrier was cut through like cloth. What activated were the two wood and fire-element charms mixed in with the second group of protective charms. "What!?" Kagami turned around and a fire-element charm ignited because of the wood aura of the wood-element charm before him.

Wood generates fire, as per Five Element Mutual Generation. Moreover, the magic had been substantially altered to make the heat produce smoke rather than flame itself. It spewed smoke like a volcano, and black smoke blossomed inside.

Then, as if to condense that smoke, the second magical wall extended inwards. The cut portion repaired itself while completely covering Kagami in swelling black smoke.

The first magical wall had two goals. First was to conceal the element charms that had been mixed in with the protective charms he threw out the second time. The other was to make him think that the second protective charm magic had been the same thing as the first, by showing off original charm magic.

The first magical wall was to deceive him, and the second magical wall produced the now expanding black smoke that had been directed inwards. Also, he had rushed away from the magic in order to divert his gaze. It was an intricate combination magic.

Of course, he didn't think that this could defeat Kagami. But the black smoke shut inside scattered like Kon's foxfire and then was all compressed onto Kagami again. Moreover, when he was sealed inside the fire aura of the black smoke, the fire would conquer Higekiri's metal aura.

He had stopped Kagami. His magic had been specially woven for that goal - that strategy.

"Kon, I'm counting on you!"

"Y-Yes!"

Leaving Kon there, Harutora glided past the road with the Raven's Wing in a flash. Before the magical wall was destroyed and the black smoke dispersed - while Kagami's vision was sealed, he would leave the battlefield and rush into a narrow alleyway.

Leaving Kon behind was to further delay his pursuit, even for just a little. Kon would be able to dematerialize at the last moment and escape in secret. Anyway, time was precious. Moreover, it was a powerful opponent he would have slim odds against if they fought seriously. So, Harutora chose to put all he had into escaping.

He passed through a narrow alley, moving towards the street next to it. Right as he rushed out, he was illuminated by lights from ahead of him. A car that had just been approaching braked in a panic. Right before they hit each other, Harutora leaped over the roof of the car.

The road he flew out to was a four-lane, two-way road. There was traffic even at this time. Harutora immediately raised his height by several meters, but if he flew higher than the surrounding structures, he would be spotted at a glance from far away.

...Hide!

The instant he thought that, the Raven's Wing stealthed its wearer without Harutora needing to use magic. Though he was surprised, he felt more grateful. In this case - right as he was preparing to rise higher again.

"That's pretty neat."

A slash of magical energy flew at him. He couldn't dodge it. Even if the Raven's Wing immediately flipped its hem to defend, the slash cut through the fabric and knocked the midair Harutora flying.

"Ugh!?"

He hurtled above the road, crashing violently into a sign on the other side of the road. Though the Raven's Wing lessened the impact, he still had difficulty breathing. He desperately looked in the direction the attack came from, noticing Kagami's figure holding a katana at the exit of the alley he had just passed through.

...So fast!

How had he done that - as he thought this, he noticed the traces of magical energy underneath Kagami's' feet.

...Damn! He had used the aura flow!?

It was Far Step.

An extraordinarily high-difficulty magic of Imperial Onmyoudou that allowed movement through the aura flow lacing through the ground. Kagami had ignored the black smoke and the magical walls covering him and had escaped Harutora's trap through the aura flow underneath his feet.

He had clearly witnessed Kagami's Far Step before, but he had forgotten it when he formulated his strategy. He had been careless. Moreover, his stealth had been overly late even for being careless. If he had hidden himself at the same time as he had escaped, he might not have been instantly caught even if Kagami had escaped from the trap with Far Step.

Harutora staggered because of the violent impact of the collision. The cars passing by honked while frantically avoiding him. When he tried to stumble to the sidewalk, the next slash came. Though he rolled to avoid it, a car behind him sped into it.

In front of the blade of magical energy.

The slash hit the front portion of it, knocking off the hood. The tires screeched and the rear wheels skidded. It spun around. When it passed through the line marker in the center, it hit a car on the other side of the road, making an earsplitting crash.

The two cars smashed into each other as horns continued blaring. The cars behind them braked in a panic. In front of the dumbfounded Harutora--

The next slash.

"You!?"

He desperately dodged, unable to even call out 'you bastard'. However, the next blade of magical energy flew by, as if he weren't even seeing what was around them.

The asphalt road was mangled and cars were torn apart. The shutter doors of buildings crumbled and signs were cut flying. Cars veered onto the sidewalk. Motors stalled. Screams, horns, and brakes continued one after another, creating new crashes.

Chaos.

"I'm with the Exorcist Bureau! I'm beginning to purify a spiritual disaster. You ordinary people, go find shelter!"

After Kagami loudly warned them, he leisurely walked to the road whose traffic had been interrupted. Harutora doubted Kagami's sanity.

"What are you doing!? You.....!"

"Ah? What do you mean, it's just like you heard, I'm 'purifying a spiritual disaster'. That Raven's Wing was originally a magical tool designated as forbidden. Because you brought it out, well, there might be some damage."

Kagami spoke bluntly with an uncaring attitude. In other words, he planned on blaming all of this disaster on the Raven's Wing.

"Pretty admirable, Harutora. That trap just now was exceptional, but let me tell you that you're putting too much emphasis on petty tricks. In real battles, you have to be cleverer."

...This shameless.....!

His heart was writhing in anger. But on the other hand, he felt angry at his own superficiality.

For example, the magical battle between Ohtomo and Doman that had been engraved in his heart. Though that had been an actual battle, it had simultaneously been a 'competition of magic'. The two had obeyed the silent rules and compared their techniques.

But this was different. He was greedy for victory.

The people who heard Kagami's warning fled screaming. This would cause the spiritual disaster purification teams to arrive even earlier. Harutora desperately racked his brain. Right now, the most important thing was what to do next. But now that he had lost his best opportunity, the tables had turned and he was forced onto the most dangerous path.

...What should he do?

"What's wrong, you're not going to do anything? Then I'll go."

After saying that, Kagami gripped Higekiri in reverse and raised it high above his head, throwing it out. "Hah!"

"Wha!"

Dumbfounded, Harutora had the Raven's Wing beat its wings to escape into the air. But at that time, Kagami had already formed a seal with his free hands.

"Noumaku sanmanda bazaradan kan!"

An overwhelming magical energy burst forth and flame whipped up around Kagami. The flame extended and became a fiery snake. It raised its sickle-like neck, attacking the airborne Harutora.

It was Harutora's first time hearing that incantation. It was an unknown magic he had never seen.

But--

...Acala's curse!

For some reason, he knew it. Had he once learned it in class? But regardless, he knew. It was the same for how he should respond.

"Noumaku samanda bazaradan sendamakaroshada sowataya untarata kanman!"

He formed a seal and chanted an incantation. Acala's protection magic. Though Kagami's eyes widened, Harutora didn't have the leisure to pay attention. Even if he tried to offset it, the magical energy he had instantly mustered was insufficient. He deftly retreated with the Raven's Wing wrapped around him while desperately neutralizing the fiery snake. He slowly eliminated Kagami's curse rather than doing it all in one go.

But, in that time--

"......Interesting."

Kagami grinned.

"Now I recall it. That..... It started with metal aura, right? Five element mutual generation - Order!"

Charm magic. The element charms he flung into the air were of the metal, water, wood and fire elements.

First, the metal-element charm became blades that attacked Harutora as he escaped the flaming snake. The Raven's Wing deflected them in place of Harutora, who focused on his protection magic.

Then, the deflected blades absorbed the heat of the fiery snake, and water emerged on its surface. After that water was whisked off, the water-element charm activated. The generated magical energy formed a torrent that covered the asphalt road. Harutora realized and recalled when he saw it.

...This was!

This time, a wood-element charm absorbed the water flow, creating treelike vines. Harutora hastily refined magical energy. Though he had neutralized the fiery snake, the final fire-element charm was activating right now. The vines instantly ignited and birthed a serpent of flame many times larger than the fiery snake.

The five element mutual generation charm magic that Ohtomo had showed Doman. It had been none other than Harutora himself who told Kagami about it. A wave of heat rushed across the road like a tsunami, throwing the surrounding air into disarray. Harutora's skin was scorched by the breath of the giant flaming serpent.

...That bastard!

Kagami had stolen the magic of Harutora's trusted homeroom teacher and used it to attack him. At that time, Doman had drawn a magic seal in midair and controlled a black wind - a wind holding metal aura - and used it to generate a black waterfall of water aura, conquering Ohtomo's fire aura. But Harutora couldn't follow that no matter what. All he could do was use the Raven's Wing to escape higher into the sky--

No.

His hands moved naturally.

"Wind!"

He ordered the Raven's Wing in a way that even he didn't understand. The Raven's Wing immediately spread its winds wide - creating black wind carrying metal aura. Immediately afterwards, Harutora's fingers wove Doman's magic seal in midair just like how he had seen back then. The black wind produced by the Raven's Wing became a torrent of water, heading straight for the serpent with the force of an avalanche.

Steam erupted with a roaring sound. The wind that was produced blew out and Harutora looked at his hands, dumbfounded.

...I see.

It was the Raven's Wing. Knowledge of magic trickled from the Raven's Wing. That feeling. Come to think of it, it had been like that when he had treated Natsume. At the time, he hadn't had time to suspect because of his single-mindedness. But now that he thought about it, magic that he couldn't possibly have known had appeared one after another in his mind back then.

...Could it be? Was it because of Yakou!?

But Harutora's state of shock was instantly interrupted.

"Interesting!"

Kagami shouted. Kagami's aura and fighting spirit were clearly conveyed to Harutora through the thick steamy fog.

"Isn't that something, Harutora! Or is it Yakou? In that case, I'll get serious too!"

Kagami charged across the asphalt road while slashing a kuji-kiri again. This time, the grid pattern rushed towards Harutora as if it had been thrown. Harutora instantly defended with the Raven's Wing, but Kagami took advantage of the opening to finish his movement.

Kagami ran up to the thrown Higekiri. He used the front of his boot to kick the blade into midair, and then grasped the hilt in reverse again, thrusting the tip into the asphalt road with a thunk.

Then, he formed a basic seal in front of Higekiri, taking its spiritual power while chanting an incantation.

"Noumaku saraba tatagyateibyaku saraba bokkeibyaku sarabata tarata senda makarosyada ken gyakigyaki saraba biginnan untarata kanman!"

Fire Realm magic. All of Kagami's magical energy merged with the spiritual power of the divine blade Higekiri, instantly developing into magic.

Appalling.

The sea of flame he had glimpsed covering the agency building from the executive office. Its might felt comparable to that magic. A destructive power clearly superior to the Raven's Wing's defenses. He would easily be ended if it engulfed him.

"Damn!"

With a flap of the Raven's Wing's hem, Harutora desperately escaped into the air. "I won't let you run away!" Kagami shouted. The Fire Realm magic stretched upwards, becoming a flashing tower of raging flame and approaching the Raven's Wing. As if judging that it couldn't escape, the Raven's Wing flitted past the front of the flame and immediately descended, brushing by the movement of the Fire Realm magic. He was probably protected by a barrier, but Harutora was quickly assaulted by an intense attack that almost made him lose consciousness.

Kagami's Fire Realm magic was focused on offensive power, and its movements were slightly slow in comparison. The Raven's Wing decided to use its speed over its defensive power. But even so, there were limitations. Kagami's Fire Realm magic continuously cut off their escape routes, gradually forcing the Raven's Wing into a corner.

...Was this the end!?

If this went on, he would be killed very quickly. He had to slow the movements of the Fire Realm, even for just an instant. Water conquers fire. He would have to cast a water magic. That magic was - now he knew. It flowed to him from the Raven's Wing.

He formed a seal.

"Tanyata udakadai bana enkei enkei sowaka!"

The master of water in ancient Indian Vedic mythology, Varuna. He was also known as one of the Adityas. The Aditya of the seas.

Fresh magical energy became a drizzle that became rain and finally a downpour that battered Kagami's Fire Realm magic. Another storm of water vapor arose, producing chaotic turbulence that tossed around the Raven's Wing.

Water magic to conquer fire magic.

However, it wasn't enough. It should have had strength - Harutora had infused his magical energy, which had practically grown out of control after he had broken his shell, without wasting a drop. But even then it was far from enough. Kagami's strength was too powerful.

The Fire Realm magic was unperturbed.

The flame rose, assaulting the battered Raven's Wing. Harutora's vision was tinted red by fire. He couldn't evade. Harutora gritted his teeth--

"Scoundrel!"

The Fire Realm magic became disordered. The Raven's Wing hastily dodged. He escaped from the jaws of death, but..... he had no time to be relieved. Harutora's gaze flew towards Kagami.

"Kon!?"

Kagami stood upright in front of Higekiri that was stuck into the asphalt road. His left arm had been fiercely stabbed into by the blade of the pouncing Kon. The defensive shikigami that he had left behind and entrusted with stopping Kagami had managed to catch up in time for her master's crisis.

But--

Kagami's expression twisted because of the blood that spurted out. Pure fury burned in his eyes. Anger that was more at having the magic battle disrupted than at the pain flooding from his wrist, along with anger at himself for being negligent.

"...Shitty brat."

Without any concern about widening his wound, Kagami forcefully swung out with his stabbed left arm.

Kon's stance broke in midair as she was flung out along with a large amount of blood.

"Hindrance."

He stabbed the blade straight at her. Kon instantly twisted her body in midair.

But she was unable to dodge.

In front of the stunned Harutora, Higekiri's magical-energy-filled blade pierced through Kon's chest.

Part 2

It was a battle of sword magic and illusion magic.

The nighttime park. Dawn was gradually approaching. Tenma had retreated to a safe place and took care of the unconscious Kyouko while watching the magic battle before him in a trance.

Every time Kogure's Demon Sword flashed, Ohtomo's charms were cut in two. Also, every time Kogure's Demon Sword flashed, Ohtomo's charms promptly disrupted the slash.

Back and forth. But a tense feeling flashed like electricity through that indifferent footwork and finger movements. It felt like their overlapping, profound intentions and strategies could be glimpsed through the timing of their breathing and the flowing of their gazes. Of course, Tenma couldn't surmise its true abstruseness, but he clearly understood that it was something 'incredible'.

Then, the magical energy that burst from the two of them formed a complete tie in their states of high output.

Their magical energies and the auras they gave off seemed almost exactly the same. In addition, even the 'atmosphere' that emerged was inexplicably balanced, like the Taijitu of Onmyoudou.

A balanced, harmonious battle as they flowed intensely. Tenma couldn't even avert his gaze as he thought of how inexplicable this scene was.

During that.

"Jin!"

Kogure shouted again.

"Think about it again. Kyouko-kun's prediction is a separate matter from whether your actions are right or wrong! Are you really going to let Harutora-kun use forbidden magic? Do you want to turn your student into a criminal?"

"......Zenjirou, it's not that kind of question anymore."

"Then what is it? I'm talking about a 'real' question. If the Taizan Fukun Ritual succeeds, the Onmyou Agency will hunt down Harutora-kun as a magic criminal. Even Natsume-kun will be the same. Even if she's resurrected, do you think she will be able to live normally in the future? First off--"

Kogure swung his blade and Ohtomo avoided it by a hairsbreadth.

"Do you think it will succeed? The Taizan Fukun Ritual? The chances are one in a thousand! And who knows what will happen if it fails! Things might become irreversible!"

"Irreversible things happened a long time ago."

Ohtomo replied and then slashed out with a blade seal, and Kogure put up a barrier to stop the magic.

"Hence, I'm being reckless. My students say they can do it, so what can I do but trust them?"

An incompatible argument between the exorcist Kogure who protected the nights of Tokyo and the Onmyou Academy teacher Ohtomo who guided his students into the future. It wasn't just that their thoughts were different, their respective positions were also different.

"Moreover....."

Ohtomo glanced at Tenma. Tenma tensed up out of surprise.

"Have you heard? It seems that Suzu's also related to this. In that case, the chance of success is far higher than one in a thousand."

Kogure's face reddened upon hearing this. "Jin!" He spat.

"You're still prepared to trust that woman!"

"Of course, I've never 'trusted' that woman. But she rarely fails."

Ohtomo was very calm in contrast to the agitated Kogure. Rather than being composed, he was trying to deny his emotional fluctuation. Kogure's anger turned to bitter remorse when he saw his appearance.

"No."

Though his voice was calm, he denied him firmly.

"I know that she had one huge failure, which was betraying you and me."

"....."

Ohtomo didn't respond with anything, staring motionlessly at Kogure. Kogure endured Ohtomo's gaze without taking a stance.

What kind of look was Ohtomo showing behind the lenses of his glasses at that moment? Tenma couldn't see, nor did he feel like he should look.

Before he noticed, the two of them had stopped moving at some point, confronting each other at the center of the park.

Kogure breathed in deeply and slowly, exhaling with the same speed.

He held the Demon Sword with two hands, pointing the blade at Ohtomo. A clear-eyed stance. Then, he reversed the blade in his hands.

He took up the reverse stance with the katana. Originally, the so-called reverse referred to instantly turning the blade around during the strike. His special preparations beforehand were a kind of antagonistic warning.

Kogure had swung the blade to fight thus far. However, he hadn't meant to 'hit' and hadn't been prepared to cut Ohtomo.

However, Kogure was now taking the reverse stance. Of course, even the back of the blade could be deadly depending on the circumstances..... It expressed that he would no longer hold back. It wasn't a command to get out of the way, but rather a proclamation that he would clear him out of the way with his blade.

How upright, Ohtomo seemed to say as he smiled faintly and wryly. His right hand moved forward, stamping the ground with the cane it held as he maintained that posture while waiting for Kogure.

".....Om chishabana shira madayama karashiya yaku kasha chibatana hobaga gatei matara hatani sowaka."

The subjugation mantra of one of the Four Heavenly Kings, the god of war Bishamonten. A mighty aura poured from all over Kogure's body and the magical energy gradually converged onto the Demon Sword. The divine sword's spiritual pressure swelled, making one feel as if the space centered on the blade had begun to twist.

Tenma's limbs trembled in fear. His throat was dry and he felt as if he were about to faint just from watching.

On the other hand, Ohtomo was composed. He stared at the aura given off by Kogure's divine blade with a penetrating gaze as if he were overlooking the dawn from a cliff. He relaxedly took a flexible stance towards the strength that very well might take his life.

Sss. Kogure's blade vibrated slightly. The hand Ohtomo grasped his cane with tightened slightly.

However, that moment didn't come.

"Stop right there, both of you back up."

The auras of the two of them were disturbed. Tenma was also taken aback, turning towards the direction the voice came from.

"Hoho."

A small boy appeared in the nighttime park accompanied by a strange voice. Tenma doubted his own eyes because the intruder was so unmindful of the situation.

But Tenma's attention very quickly moved behind the boy. "Ah." He looked there and inadvertently let out a gasp. A shikigami. Doman's shikigami that had attacked the agency building. Also, there was another person. There was a man who was managing to stand by borrowing the shikigami's shoulder - an extremely weak old man.

The boy laughed with a 'hoh' again.

"Incidentally, those words just now were this guy's, not mine. It seems that he can't talk right now, so I'm speaking for him."

He spoke to Kogure and Ohtomo, who were stunned and rooted to the ground.

Who was it? Tenma stared at the boy and the old man. He didn't recognize the boy. He wouldn't be able to forget such a peculiar child even after just one meeting. But he felt like the old man was a bit familiar. His appearance had changed greatly, but they had met somewhere - right as he thought that.

"......Chief Amami."

Kogure spoke with a hoarse voice. That made him remember. The old man who had visited the hospital room before them when they had gone to see Ohtomo. He remembered that he was Ohtomo's former boss, the Mystical Investigator Chief Amami Daizen.

"That undying old man....."

It was Ohtomo who said that. His voice seemed to be uncharacteristically shaking.

"You should stop acting so recklessly when you're at this age, it's unfitting for an old person. You'll make trouble for the people left behind."

The old man was extremely weak.

But he smiled rebelliously at Kogure and Ohtomo.

"Kon!"

Higekiri's magical-energy-carrying blade pierced through Kon's left flank.

The girl's blue eyes opened wide as if they would pop.

Kagami pulled out Higekiri. Kon's expression froze and her body was covered with intense lag. She stumbled as she tried to escape, used up her strength, and fell onto the road with a plop.

The lag all over her body didn't stop. Kon lost her balance. The asphalt road on the other side of her was visible through her transparency.

"Kon!?"

Kon didn't reply. But he felt the spiritual link between master and shikigami rapidly weakening. His mind was blank. His legs that tried to run pedaled in midair.

Kagami didn't stop his attack.

The wound on his left hand was quite serious, but Kagami put priority on the 'final blow' rather than treatment. He stepped towards Kon. The blade of Higekiri that extended from his right hand flashed white from the light remaining from the Fire Realm magic.

The Raven's Wing flew out like an arrow, replying to Harutora's wordless cry.

He circled around from behind and charged between Kagami and Kon. But the instant Kagami glanced at him - a glance as hot as magma - the Raven's Wing changed its path.

"Hey!?"

The Raven's Wing agilely pulled away, ignoring Harutora's protest. It judged that it shouldn't enter the range of Kagami's sword.

By now, the Raven's Wing had endured the slashes of magical energy that flew from Higekiri multiple times. Though it wasn't unhurt, the blade had never pierced through to its wearer.

But Kagami's surprise attack at the start had been different. Higekiri's blade had cut the Raven's Wing's hem. In other words, a direct cut from Higekiri's blade would overcome the Raven's Wing's defensive power.

It put priority on the wearer's safety rather than his thoughts. It was a natural judgment for a magical tool that protected its wearer, but it strayed from the rules that a shikigami ought to 'absolutely obey the master's wishes'. Harutora angrily gnashed his teeth. In other words, the Raven's Wing currently hadn't recognized Harutora as its true master.

"......Harutora. Are you looking down on me?"

As his blood dripped, Kagami spoke in a voice that felt paralyzing due to its incredible anger.

"The master's preparing to risk himself for a shikigami? Isn't that about enough?"

After he spat abuse, he stared at the Kon slumped on the road. It wasn't killing intent that emerged in his eyes. It was just a cold decision to cut down something like his enemy's charm.

"Damn--!?"

He couldn't just sit and watch. Even if that was what the Raven's Wing decided.

...Go!

The Raven's Wing beat its wings again as Harutora pleaded.

It approached Kagami. Kagami shot a stabbing gaze towards Harutora again. The result was the same. The Raven's Wing beat its wings again before reaching the largest range Higekiri could reach, gaining the lift to escape above. After Kagami confirmed that Harutora had changed his course, he mercilessly raised Higekiri over his head, returning his gaze back to Kon's collapsed body.

In that instant, Harutora took off the Raven's Wing.

When his arms slipped out of the sleeves, a surprised gasp came from the Raven's Wing, or maybe that was just an illusion. Harutora descended, dropping to the road. His legs bent as they absorbed the impact. When Kagami turned his head in surprise, he sprinted forward with all his might.

"Kon!"

Kon weakly opened her eyes.

Then, the fierce flash of a blade.

The first thing he felt was heat. Burning heat. A burning shock as if he had touched scorching iron. A heat and shock that forcibly crashed all of his thinking - along with pain.

But at the same time as he felt that heat, shock, and pain, he felt a light, unreliable sensation on his fingertips.

He had to protect her.

That feeling called Harutora from the border between the realms of consciousness and unconsciousness.

Then, before he noticed it.

Harutora was standing on the road holding Kon in his arms.

He couldn't remember what he had done. But he had moved about five meters away and was in a tilted posture while confronting the Higekiri-holding Kagami.

"......I see."

Kagami spoke. Blood dripped from Higekiri's blade.

"You're a genuine idiot."

His ears barely caught those words, and they almost didn't enter his brain. The current Harutora's brain was filled with 'pain'. This was the first time he had experienced such an omnipresent pain. In any case, pain. The hard-to-endure pain didn't recede a bit.

A rushing roar resounded. For a moment, he didn't realize that it was his own blood flow. Every time his blood pounded, intense pain shot through him. The pain raged and exploded. It continued without stopping.

Kon turned her body in his arms.

"......Harutora-sama.....!?"

Harutora stared at the shikigami in his arms because her voice contained a huge shock. He felt like something was different from usual. It wasn't the intense lag on his shikigami. Rather, the figure reflected in his eyes was itself clearly irregular.

He realized because of that reason.

His left eye couldn't see.

Then, Harutora finally noticed that the left half of his face was wet and that it was the source of the intense pain destroying his thinking.

His left eye had been cut.

Higekiri's blade that Kagami had swung had strongly cut Harutora's face from the top down, right above his left eye.

"......You bastard....."

Kon experienced lag as she turned towards Kagami in Harutora's arms.

"You bastard!"

Kon howled, infuriated. A bellow with no heed for her own wounds, that easily led to her lag being erased.

But needless to say, Kagami didn't care.

"......हुं."

Kundali's seed syllable mantra blasted back Harutora and his servant. He no longer had the protection of the Raven's Wing. He was hit head-on and sent flying. The ground and the sky rotated intensely, and when he thought that, a hard impact greeted

his entire body. Only after some time did he realize that he had fallen onto the asphalt road.

All his nerves were paralyzed, and pain was the only thing dominating his body. He could no longer even move a finger.

.....Ugh.....

He might die. Harutora truly felt this amidst his hazy consciousness.

The reason it didn't feel real was because his mental ability had declined. The scene before him was reflected in his blurry eye as he stayed in his realism-lacking state.

"......What a boring conclusion."

Kagami spoke seemingly regretfully as he lifted Higekiri. Kon staggered up in front of him while lag appeared all over her body.

That small back. She spread her arms to try to protect Harutora.

"I--"

Kon spoke.

She gathered her willpower, gathering the meaning of her existence, and proclaimed resolutely.

"I won't allow a brat like you to steal away the master I waited so long for!"

Thump. Her heart beat.

Harutora opened his remaining right eye. With his bloodstained left eye--

The beautiful moon hung in the sky.

He looked up at the moon, sitting on the porch of the residence.

He held a cup of alcohol. The aromatic alcohol diffused in the air.

"Yakou-sama."

A call came from the residence, in darkness that the moonlight hadn't fallen to.

"Have you still not changed your mind?"

He smiled bitterly and sipped from his cup in response to that question. 'Yeah', he replied. Then, he continued with 'Sorry'.

The sounds of insects that came from the courtyard indifferently and softly alleviated the silence between them.

She quietly stared at her master in the moonlight.

Then, she sat properly and slowly bowed her head.

"I'll always wait on. Until the end of time. Because I - am your--

"Hishamaru?"

Harutora mumbled.

In that moment, the five Tsuchimikado seals that continued to bind her began to unravel, complying with their old covenant.

The evening twilight.

The infant's sobs that came from deep inside the residence finally stopped. Not long afterwards, a man appeared in the Bellflower Room that faced the courtyard.

His age was about thirty. He wore Japanese clothes and gold-rimmed glasses. His slender appearance made him seem somewhat intellectual - a slightly exquisite impression. Moreover, wrinkles rooted in worry and confusion were deeply engraved into him.

He had the strength to peer into the future and the power to read those possibilities. It was a difficult-to-obtain power for most people. But the power wasn't a blessing

to him. It was a power that forcefully bound his heart with anxiety and restlessness. An unlucky power that just increased his troubles.

But now he could only rely on that power of his. The future was extremely difficult, and he was powerless to deal with it.

He sat unconsciously and motionlessly in the Bellflower Room. He looked into the courtyard through the wide sliding doors. The courtyard's hue was currently changing as it was dyed by the setting sun. He watched that change, entranced. Only at this moment did the worry and confusion on his face seem to slightly weaken.

But he could only be composed and stable for the blink of an eye.

Before he noticed, there was someone in the courtyard.

On the other side of the porch. Her shoulders were bathed in the sun as she bowed her head on one knee. Even though he had been constantly staring into the corridor, he hadn't been able to notice that person approaching.

Stealth. Moreover, it was the stealth of dematerialization. A technique that only a shikigami could have. But there were several strong barriers in the residence, blocking unauthorized spiritual entities from approaching. She could pass through it because she had been a dweller of this residence in the past.

His shock receded very quickly and a bitter smile came to his lips.

"You're quite early. .....No, you've been waiting for this whole time."

Waiting for her master - She didn't reply to his half-spoken words. She didn't particularly need to reply, since he had spoken to her. It was natural.

"Who are you?"

".....I am Hishamaru."

"I see."

A voice that felt clear and more than a little bit upright.

A rather cautious debut for a legendary shikigami. One could notice the mysterious, powerful spiritual energy contained in her body even as she silently bowed her head like this.

"What do you want?"

"To be by my lord."

Those reticent words contained an iron will that absolutely wouldn't back down. She only lowered her head like this because he was the current head of the Tsuchimikado. Although it was a position worthy of etiquette to her, he definitely wasn't an object of absolute obedience.

He wasn't family, nor was she blood-related. Her loyalty and dedication was only for one soul.

He narrowed his eyes behind his glasses, quietly staring at her as she knelt in the courtyard. The slowly setting sun tinted the shikigami's still-lowered face in blazing colors.

He couldn't read the stars of shikigami.

But - the future would be extremely difficult, and he was powerless to deal with it.

"......There are conditions."

She finally looked up. Her fair, beautiful appearance was revealed. Beautiful and elegant blue eyes stared straight at him.

Those 'conditions' were now fulfilled.

There were five seals in total binding her. The first one was a seal covering the others, a seal that covered seals themselves. It was a seal whose goals were to hide the other four seals from others and to keep her unaware of the fact that she was being sealed.

The first seal had just been released, and the memory of the covenant with Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi in that evening setting sun reawakened. Her self-awareness that managed 'who' she was. Then, according to the terms of the covenant, her will and sense of mission that had been sealed alongside were released consecutively.

In that moment, she first awoke as a 'little Hishamaru'.

The first thing Hishamaru confirmed was the condition of her master - Harutora.

His left eye was wounded. He was bruised all over. His spiritual damage was also huge. They weren't life-threatening, but he was in a dangerous condition. After all, there was still an 'enemy' before her.

Every second counted, Hishamaru judged.

Hishamaru connected the remaining seals, ignoring their original ordering. She would deal with releasing them all at once.

But, at that point the 'enemy' before her noticed the abnormality.

His eyes sharpened as he said:

"...What? Hey!"

His instincts weren't bad. Hishamaru focused her entire mind on the releasing process. She forcefully raised its speed.

The second and third seals were immediately released and the things compressed spread out.

The second seal sealed her 'personality'. The third seal sealed her 'form'. The second and third seals were linked together, and they originally weren't things that could be instantly released. But fortunately, the third seal had 'loosened'. After the seal Yasuzumi had cast on Harutora had been half-destroyed at Harutora's hands, she had received the huge magical energy released from her master and problems had arisen in the magic. Moreover, Higekiri's slash from earlier had weakened the seal's strength again. Hishamaru took down the third seal in as few steps as possible, hence also shortening the time it took her to succeed in releasing the second seal.

As Hishamaru's consciousness expanded, her tough personality as the able shikigami assisting Yakou awoke. The pure blue eyes were filled with the mature, grounded and intellectual strength and blooming ability that Yasuzumi had specifically left intact. At the same time, the lag over her body changed its former appearance as she flickered while beginning to 'grow'.

Her ears and tail remained, her arms and legs extended, and her body type changed, her appearance slowly maturing. It was as if she had grown ten years in the blink of an eye. She slowly regained her original form as Hishamaru, a form matching her personality inside.

Then, what appeared was an otherworldly beauty.

The untainted sharpness of a mighty female warrior, bewitching beauty, and a flirtatious, dangerous composure that contrasted with her actual nature. Her seemingly seductive charm served as a foil to her beautiful appearance.

But the change in her appearance caught her 'enemy's' eye.

"...Noumaku sanmanda bazaradan kan!"

Kagami rapidly changed Acala's curse, placing it on Higekiri - then, there was a flash. The slicing silver blade released a wave of heat as it swung towards Hishamaru.

Though the barrier she instantly put up neutralized the might of the heatwave, it was unable to block it. The instant she judged that it wouldn't do, Hishamaru focused all her remaining strength on Harutora behind her rather than on herself. She put up a barrier to protect her master. Right afterwards, the heatwave that broke through the first barrier sent Hishamaru flying, and her still-growing body was covered with lag as it hurtled through the sky.

The seal-releasing magic became disordered. Hishamaru ground her teeth, but her consciousness was directed towards Harutora rather than herself. The heatwave broke through the second barrier she put up. The magical energy was insufficient. Harutora's body was sent flying helplessly and he tumbled across the road like a doll. No strength to resist or strength to escape remained in her master's body. He was on the verge of losing consciousness.

Hishamaru made her decision.

There were two seals remaining. The fourth seal sealed her 'spiritual power', which was an important factor to Hishamaru.

In the past, she had once given up her human flesh and reincarnated as a spiritual entity.

To the current her, her spiritual power was the strength directly linked to maintaining her existence. She originally would have needed to spend an entire night - or at least a few hours - to undo this seal in order to maintain her spiritual stability.

But now, she needed spiritual power no matter what in order to save her master from the current crisis. Hence, Hishamaru didn't release the seal, she began to forcefully destroy it instead.

She applied magic to release the fifth seal and let it be pushed back on its own. In contrast, the magic stole control away from the fourth seal, and so then she blasted a corner of the seal with her own power.

She converted her regained spiritual power into magical energy and slowly pried the seal open further. Her spiritual energy rapidly swelled up, but her stability-lacking spiritual energy started shaking Hishamaru's existence from the very roots. Intense lag covered her body, as if electricity were blooming from inside her.

But even so, it wasn't fast enough.

"What the hell are you!?"

Kagami hacked his blade of magical energy at Hishamaru as she rapidly regained her strength. Though her strength slowly recovered, she was turning it all towards the destruction of the seal. She tried to avoid overconsumption, seeing through the swordplay and dodging the slashes by a hairsbreadth. As she attracted the attention of the 'enemy', she progressively destroyed the fourth seal with all her power.

But as expected, Kagami was keen. "Shaver!" After seeing that Hishamaru's goal was to buy time, he threw Higekiri from his hand into the air.

The servant shikigami Shaver grabbed the hilt of the thrown Higekiri after materializing. A tall, slender, fragile man. Though he was a powerful shikigami who had once put Harutora and the others in a pinch, it seemed to be true that his aura still hadn't recovered completely. His expression was empty and his movements lacked vigor.

But Kagami glared at Hishamaru while coldly commanding.

"Take care of Harutora!"

Hishamaru immediately interrupted the destruction of her seal, dematerializing and rapidly hurrying towards Harutora's side, but--

"Don't look down on me!"

Kagami's kuji-kiri knocked Hishamaru aside. Hishamaru fell onto the road while rematerializing. No good. There was no opening. Her strength still wasn't enough to break through head-on.

Kagami's wound should have been quite painful. But Kagami didn't let it show as he focused on Hishamaru. He tried to size up her true worth. Then, behind his back, his shikigami held Higekiri and began to slowly approach Harutora.

She wouldn't be able to make it if this went on. She resolved herself again.

She didn't destroy the seal, she just made the part that the seal bound - her spiritual entity self - disintegrate and forced it out through the ruptured gap. Needless to say, it couldn't possibly be reconstructed if she did this, and she would jeopardize her own substance. But even so, her 'overall self' would increase. She could regain her past strength for a while.

Even after her long wait behind the seal, she protected her master from beside him. Her power didn't have meaning if she couldn't protect him, and the reason for her existence would also vanish. She prioritized her master's safety over everything. That was a fact of life for a defensive shikigami.

But unfortunately, she wasn't completely able to release the fifth seal.

The fifth, final seal sealed Hishamaru's past 'memories'. The various memories of the years she had spent with her master. To Hishamaru, each and every one of them

was an irreplaceable treasure. Even losing some of them would be more agonizing than destroying part of herself.

Even so, she couldn't possibly prioritize her past memories over her current master. Harsh resolution emerged on Hishamaru's fair, beautiful appearance, and then she disintegrated her inner self. She pushed it through the gap of the seal on the verge of being destroyed and seized her power in the blink of an eye.

It couldn't even be called lag anymore. Immeasurable lightning burst forth all over Hishamaru's body. A gigantic spiritual power howled as it spun into a whirlwind. Kagami stared at Hishamaru, stunned.

Hishamaru declared as if striking a blow.

"Out of the way, brat!"

She was unable to immediately control the power she had forcefully wrested back. Hishamaru fired her raging spiritual power at Kagami in the form of foxfire.

A blazing blue flame assaulted Kagami like an avalanche. Kagami put up a barrier. The foxfire engulfed the barrier entirely.

Then, Hishamaru used the pouring spiritual power, refining magical energy out of that flow. She reached out her left hand and tightened her right hand. The posture for pulling a bow. The foxfire she shot out condensed. Kagami's expression changed, but he was already too slow.

"Hifumiyoimune, kotomochirorane, shikuruyuitowa, sohatamakumeka!"

The chant of divine words shot out an arrow of magical energy. But rather than an arrow, that giant magical energy was better described as an artillery round.

After Kagami's eyes widened greatly, the magical energy violently collided with his barrier, eliminating and piercing through the slight resistance. The barrier exploded backwards because of the huge pressure. The asphalt road was gouged out and fragments flew into the air.

What a hit. But Hishamaru didn't have the leisure to bask in her victory. In a corner of her vision, the slowly-advancing Shaver stood next to Harutora. The Higekiri in his hands - the blade that had pierced through her and stolen her master's left eye - housed an ominous light again. But there wouldn't be a third time. Hishamaru sprinted, her tail fluttering with the wind. The current Shaver wasn't powerful. Everything would be fine as long as she pulled him away from her master.

She could make it.

However.

"It's not over yet!"

Flame magic stopped her path from next to her. She was taken by surprise and slipped. It was Kagami. How was that possible? After she thought that, something awoke in her recently-emptied memories.

Far Step. Again - but she didn't think that he would be able to instantly use such a high-difficulty magic at that kind of time. That man really was one of the best of just a handful of modern Onmyouji. Hishamaru regretfully gritted her teeth, readying the next magic, but--

At the same time, Shaver raised Higekiri above his head.

Her heart suddenly tightened.

She released foxfire while rushing towards Shaver. But needless to say, Kagami wouldn't permit that. She took step after step but was too far. Terror gradually coursed through her whole body. "No!" Hishamaru sprinted, abandoning defense. But even if she could ignore the wounds inflicted by Kagami's magic, she couldn't take back the speed that she had lost.

She could make it.

No - she couldn't make it.

Shaver swung down Higekiri. The moment Hishamaru let out a scream--

"With this, that's two favors."

Boom. Something heavy landed on the other side of Harutora.

A man. A man bulging with burly muscles, taller than two meters - no, he seemed even larger now. The man extended his right hand at the same time as he landed, easily catching and stopping Higekiri's swung blade.

His short golden hair flashed like a crown and an intense light shot from the narrowed eyes among his chiseled features. He wore a suit and no tie. His normally trendy-seeming clothing only now seemed valiant like a battle outfit. There was no substance to the empty left sleeve, and it was blown by the man's demonic aura, flapping elegantly.

"Kakugyouki!?"

"Yo, Hishamaru. It seems like you're in quite a pinch. Have you become dull?"

The man - Kakugyouki - grinned rudely, then pushed Higekiri's blade back upwards with his right hand. Shaver confronted him over Harutora. His empty expression up till now faded, and he revealed hostility and bellowed like a wild beast. His fighting intent poured forth because he was in front of this oni.

Kakugyouki harrumphed.

"Pathetic. Come back later."

Then, lifting the blade that he grasped, he hurled Higekiri flying together with Shaver.

The thrown Shaver dropped near Kagami, swiftly dematerializing. Clatter. Only Higekiri fell to the asphalt road. Kakugyouki looked at Kagami. "What do you want?" He asked provocatively, raising an eyebrow.

"......!?"

Kagami clenched his teeth.

Sheltering Harutora below him, Kakugyouki overwhelmed the surroundings with his demonic aura. Hishamaru also glared at the Kagami who had pushed her master into a crisis with a gaze containing clear killing intent.

That arrogant Onmyouji might have thoroughly fought with her if his opponent had only been Hishamaru.

But when Kakugyouki came by to confront him as an opponent - he wasn't stupid and arrogant enough to believe that much.

"You're an eyesore."

She ignited foxfire. Kagami immediately raised Hiegkiri, dodging the giant fireball. Then, he performed complex footwork and vanished. Far Step. He had withdrawn.

She could pursue, but it might disrupt the aura flow. But right now, Harutora was the priority.

She ran up to Harutora, putting healing charms on him with all her power. "Cloth!" She shouted without even turning around.

Kakugyouki shrugged his shoulders resignedly, tearing off his empty left sleeve. He didn't even get a word of thanks for saving her from a crisis. Rather, if he asked for thanks, she would start sternly lecturing him about 'what have you been doing all this time'. Kakugyouki smiled bitterly at Hishamaru who laid a cloth on Harutora's left eye while lag covered her own body.

He knew that she was dedicated to her master. Though it wasn't worth listening to, he still said:

"Honestly. You're so devoted."

"......Ugh." Then, Harutora groaned and twisted his body as Hishamaru poured magic into him. Hishamaru alertly supported Harutora's upper body.

Hishamaru supported Harutora into a sitting position on the road and groaned again. Then, he slightly opened his remaining right eye, quietly turning his gaze to the shikigami and oni before him.

Tears overflowed from Hishamaru's blue eyes. Those tears were like dazzling gems on her beautiful appearance that was breathtaking from up close.

"......Hishamaru."

Harutora said. After Hishamaru's cheeks reddened in gratitude, she moved back slightly, kneeled, and bowed.

"Hey!" Then sure enough, she barked angrily, knowing that the presence next to her hadn't moved.

After Kakugyouki stared at Harutora, he shrugged deliberately as if meaning to say 'just for a bit'. But then he grinned and moved back next to Hishamaru, going down on one knee and taking the same posture.

A desolate road that traffic had been cut off from.

In front of Harutora who sat on the asphalt road, Yakou's past attendants bowed deeply as if reuniting with their past master.

The legendary shikigami, Hishamaru and Kakugyouki.

Also, the legendary Onmyouji, Tsuchimikado Yakou.

Flap. With the sound of flapping wings, a yatagarasu landed on Harutora's shoulder. Hishamaru shot a sharp, dangerous look at the infidel who hadn't shown up until now.

But.

"Leave it, Hishamaru. It was always like this."

Hishamaru trembled because of those words.

"How....."

She confirmed with a trembling voice.

"How should we address you?"

Needless to say, Hishamaru also had Kon's memories. No matter what her master picked, her devotion wouldn't be tainted at all - even so, she was still nervous.

Harutora replied indifferently to this.

"Whatever you want."

Then, Harutora put strength into his limbs and prepared to rise. Hishamaru panicked first and tried to help him, but Kakugyouki lifted Harutora's body as naturally as breathing and made him stand. Of course, he also noticed Hishamaru's resentful glare, but Kakugyouki didn't pay it any heed. Because there would be no end to it.

"......So?"

Standing up as well, Kakugyouki lowered his head to look at Harutora while asking.

"What next?"

Harutora quickly glanced at Kakugyouki, then moved his gaze to Hishamaru.

In a dispassionate voice, he said:

"We'll carry out the ceremony for the Taizan Fukun Ritual and call Tsuchimikado Natsume back to this world."

Part 3

Of course, Kurahashi and the others had their reasons for not killing Amami immediately. Because they were on guard for curses.

It was natural for a practitioner of Amami's level to have woven curses of revenge that sacrificed his life in case he was killed - at least it felt that way to Amami and Kurahashi's generation. As a result, how they should deal with him became a problem, and they were limited to guaranteeing the practitioner's life. They were people who had lived in that kind of era.

Hence, since the truth was concealed from Kurahashi and he understood that he wouldn't be able to get any help out of Amami anymore, he decided not to kill him immediately. He decided to spend some time slowly whittling away at Amami's spiritual power and vitality. That was so that even when the curse activated, its power would be weakened. That was also the natural method of response for those of Kurahashi's generation, and actually, there were several examples of this kind of 'resolution' in records that the Onmyou Agency couldn't make public.

But even if he 'let him live for now', he obviously wouldn't leave him alone. He cast the same 'magical energy suppression seal' that was on Kagami Reiji and Dairenji Suzuka, but rather than to 'limit', it was to 'erase' - He cast it so that he would be unable to control any magical energy, and even his spirit-sensing ability of sensing aura was sealed. He also burned his throat with magic to block him from chanting incantations, and cut the tendons of his hands to make him unable to form seals. Then, he stole his consciousness and locked him in the underground hell, casting an ancient magic that would kill him after ten days. In some sense, it could be called a ruthless disposal with less regard for human dignity than 'simple killing'.

Amami ought to have no way at all of turning the tables after being sealed so tightly. And Kurahashi wouldn't have permitted it.

But.....

There was also someone who couldn't agree with Kurahashi's position. Miyachi. Though he was unable to ask for help, he hesitated to take Amami's life. He decided afterwards to release the forbidden magic killing Amami on his own and replaced it with a different forbidden magic that 'froze' the subject. He thought that he would awaken Amami when all obstacles had vanished after months or even years and have him live the rest of his life with the identity of an old man, and not as a practitioner.

But Miyachi didn't know.

The barrier guarding the underground prison was just something with the goal of keeping the inside locked down. It was hard to call it foolproof from outside contact.

Also, when he had learned the true identities of Kurahashi and the others and learned that his life was at risk, Amami had immediately left behind a fan as if grasping for straws.

That fan's name was Oboro. A high-level mechanical shikigami that Amami had made through devoted effort. Its strength wasn't great, but it possessed a personality mimicking its master's - making it almost as capable as Amami. It was a personality that could act as his proxy and make similar judgments.

After its master's consciousness broke off and it learned that he was still alive, Oboro tried to contact its master with all its power. Then, even thought it was unable to release the forbidden magic from its master's body, it succeeded in coming in contact with its master's consciousness across the barrier.

Needless to say, the prison's barrier was sturdy, and Amami couldn't control it even if he had regained his consciousness. But Oboro brought up several options to its master while speculating what kind of choices its master would make, thus finally receiving instructions from its master.

Also, if Oboro was the one who substituted for Amami's mental activity, the one who substituted for Amami's eyes and activity was the purchase he had found interesting before, the 'Trick Spider' manmade shikigami that he had released within the agency building.

The Trick Spider had two strengths. One was that it could act autonomously semi-permanently. The second was that after its initial setting up was completed, even ordinary people without spirit-sensing ability - of course, along with Onmyouji whose spirit-sensing ability had been sealed - could control it. Needless to say, Amami had already completed the Trick Spider's setup when he released it into the agency building.

The half-dead yet newly conscious Amami controlled the Trick Spider with Oboro as an intermediary, desperately focusing on exploring a chance to counterattack. He waited for an unexpected miracle, waited for a coincidental convergence, spreading a web for 'that time'. That was willpower as well as obsession. There was nothing else at all. It was absolutely no overstatement to say that the possibility that he was rewarded was miniscule.

But that door was opened. Via Harutora. Via Ohtomo. Via Touji, Kyouko, and Suzuka. Also, via Tenma.

And at the end it was Doman. After Ohtomo left the agency building, Doman reluctantly ended his magical battle with Miyachi and pulled back. But he laughed loudly when he saw Amami whom his shikigami had brought along.

Needless to say, this still wasn't Amami's victory. Amami had only crawled back out of hell. The battle started now. And the chance of winning that battle was even lower than of his survival earlier.

But it seemed that his 'fortune' had not yet withered. Amami evaluated that of himself.

"Ah, I'm not too sure about the details of the situation, but this guy was definitely locked in the underground prison. As for the rest..... you can probably imagine, seeing him 'like this'."

Doman looked back after he said this, looking at Amami who leaned on the shikigami.

Amami was in a condition where it was inconceivable that he was alive. Now that the shikigami Oboro had been destroyed, he couldn't even form thoughts or words. The giant cross carved on his forehead - the 'X'-mark seal - hadn't even been properly treated and was festering. It wouldn't have been strange for it to have been fatal if not for the curse cast on him keeping his life 'frozen'.

Kogure stopped swinging his sword in front of Amami. He lost his words of response upon glimpsing the darkness of the Onmyou Agency.

Tenma held his breath as he watched because of the adults' conversation. Even if he couldn't understand everything that had happened, the depth and spectacularity was unconsciously conveyed to him.

Kukuku. Doman laughed and spoke mischievously:

"...So? What now, Ohtomo."

"We retreat."

Ohtomo replied. "Very well." Doman obeyed without complained, seeming completely satisfied.

Kogure looked at Ohtomo with a solemn expression, his hand still on his sword.

".....Jin. You..... What are you going to do after this?"

Ohtomo turned his head upon being asked. Their gazes met.

"Well, for now, I'll flee for a few days."

"......The Onmyou Agency will be hunting you, you know? I will too, if I'm ordered."

"......Indeed."

"Do you think you'll manage?"

"No. ......But I think I have to."

After Ohtomo replied, he shrugged his shoulders with a leisurely smile. After Kogure stared at Ohtomo for a while, he looked away first, his solemn expression disturbed.

It was the moment of Ohtomo and Kogure's parting farewell.

Kogure's blade shook as he turned with a posture befitting a swordsman to Amami who leaned on the shikigami's shoulder.

"Chief Amami. Though I don't know the details of the situation, I can read on your face that you want me to let them go. But let me say this. The Onmyou Agency is necessary. Most people believe it to be necessary. As long as people require the Onmyou Agency, my sword will swing for those people."

Even Kogure definitely wouldn't believe that he could win with Ohtomo and Doman as his opponents. However, it was because of Kogure's restraint that he was able to let it be with those words.

"...Not bad. That is also a kind of path."

Doman replied with a deeply shadowed smile in place of Amami.

"Onmyouji Kogure Zenjirou. I hope to test my skills against you sometime."

Kogure sheathed his blade wordlessly without responding to Doman.

Then, he left the park without giving Ohtomo another glance.

Part 4

Tsuchimikado Yakou's defensive shikigami.

The arms that assisted him.

Harutora secretly infiltrated the Exorcist Bureau headquarters along with the ones who had once been called his 'arms'.

He would probably be able to achieve his goal even if he entered straightforwardly. But extraneous fights would waste time. Harutora was wrapped in the Raven's Wing again and cast stealth on himself to infiltrate the headquarters with Hishamaru and Kakugyouki. No one noticed him as he entered the Spirit Calming Room.

An inorganic, cold, drab, and vast room. A bed was placed by the inner wall and was illuminated from above by a light.

And also - in front of it were guests who had arrived first.

"......You finally came."

The one who replied was Yashamaru, who had preemptively reached Natsume's side after being ordered by Kurahashi - or not.

It was Takiko.

By her two sides were Yashamaru, whose bitter face seemed partially ready to yield, and Kumomaru who was showing nervousness.

Takiko stepped forward slightly from behind the two Yase Doji.

After Takiko noticed the cloth covering Harutora's left eye, her expression stiffened. Then, although she met the gaze of his remaining right eye, she couldn't keep looking and lowered her gaze.

Then.

"......I heard about everything, Harutora..... or should I call you Yakou now?"

"Call me whatever you want."

Harutora coldly said the same thing as before. Though interest surfaced behind Yashamaru's monocle upon seeing his attitude, he didn't say anything at all.

"Then..... Harutora? I..... I won't apologize to you. I didn't intend for that to happen to Natsume. But that doesn't mean anything to you, right?"

"...Indeed."

Harutora replied completely flatly. The instant she heard Harutora's reply, Takiko's expression twisted as if her heart had been stabbed - the willpower she relied on instantly vanished.

If one observed carefully, they would notice that Takiko's eyes were reddened. They were swollen after crying and after trying to conceal that.

Takiko mustered her courage, looking up again and staring intently at Harutora.

Harutora looked back at Takiko with an indifferent right eye.

He could understand what Takiko wanted to convey. Harutora no longer held any hate towards her now. Including her straightforwardness and original liveliness, her sincere and honest nature, and her immaturity and what she had brought about through her recklessness didn't make him angry. In fact, he even felt a bit positive towards her.

But she 'couldn't be trusted'.

Kon's - Hishamaru's - advice was now imprinted in his heart. Being unable to trust her wasn't just about compromising. It was something he had decided that applied to most occasions.

The living were silent in the Spirit Calming Room that settled down the dead.

It was the one-armed oni who broke the silence.

"......So?"

Kakugyouki sarcastically repeated what he had said a bit earlier.

"What now?"

The air in the Spirit Calming Room tensed as if faint electricity had coursed through it.

Harutora, with Hishamaru and Kakugyouki to his left and right.

And Takiko, with Yashamaru and Kumomaru to her left and right.

Hishamaru's eyes held an intolerant killing intent, but there was enjoyable unrestraint in Kakugyouki's eyes. In comparison, there was a sharp light appraising Harutora in Yashamaru's eyes and Kumomaru's eyes were filled with tension, resolution, and an unyielding fighting spirit.

The Tsuchimikado and the Souma, who had once been allies.

These two factions were currently silently scattering sparks in the Spirit Calming Room housing Natsume's corpse. If the balance between the two sides collapsed and the curtain to battle was lifted... The Exorcist Bureau headquarters would definitely suffer a devastating blow no less than what the agency building had received.

But the two masters stopped their simmering shikigami at the same time. They faced each other while each raising an arm, stopping the shikigami waiting behind them.

"Harutora."

Takiko checked.

"Are you going to resurrect Natsume? Using the Taizan Fukun Ritual?"

Harutora didn't reply to Takiko's question. But not replying was an answer in this occasion.

"I'll leave Natsume to you."

Takiko slowly announced. Hishamaru revealed a surprised expression from beside Harutora.

On the other hand, Yashamaru said while maintaining his calm demeanor:

"......Princess?"

"Wait."

Takiko spoke coldly without even turning her head. After Yashamaru rolled his eyes towards the ceiling, he didn't open his mouth to speak again.

"......Of course, I don't think this will be able to make up for things. But....."

Takiko's longing words stopped and she swallowed the following words.

She pressed her lips together, looked up, and straightened her chest. She stepped forward courageously like that. Kumomaru hastily pursued, and Yashamaru also followed.

The distance between Takiko and Harutora shortened. Harutora remained motionless, Kakugyouki's posture stayed calm, and only Hishamaru narrowed her eyes slowly. "I will counterattack the moment you do anything unusual." She didn't hide her threatening air.

The sound of Takiko and the others' footsteps echoed in the Spirit Calming Room. The two sides approached each other and touched--

Like that, they brushed past each other.

"......Harutora. See you another time....."

After Takiko dropped those words, she left the Spirit Calming Room with Yashamaru and Kumomaru.

Hishamaru glared in the direction of the departing Takiko and the others with an appearance of unacceptance.

"......Is this alright?"

Her questioning voice was filled with the feeling that she would pick a fight with Takiko and the others without reservation if he gave a single word of command.

But as for Harutora--

"It's alright."

He responded like that, flipping the hem of the Raven's Wing with unconcerned steps.

They headed towards the depths of the Spirit Calming Room as if to replace Takiko and the others.

The bed positioned underneath the light. A girl lay there.

Harutora leaned down from above his childhood friend, calling out to her in the gentlest voice.

"Sorry. I've made you wait, Natsume."

Then, he reached his hands out respectfully, lightly lifting the lying Natsume.

The pitch-black summer night brightened bit by bit, lighting up with color.

At the same time, the light of the stars blended into the sky, rapidly beginning to hide themselves.

Stars whose existence could only be learned of during the darkness of the night. But they didn't vanish, even during the dawn. They existed without changing in the sky, accompanied by the sun. Always waiting for the arrival of the next night.

The heat of the asphalt that was continuously baked by the sun during the day didn't reach the rooftop. On the other hand, the temperature was stolen away because of the constantly blowing wind.

Saotome sat lightly on the edge of the stone platform, looking up into the sky as her tense body trembled.

There were four torii around the stone platform. The north torii was black. The east was blue. The south was red. Finally, the west was white.

It was the Heavenly Altar on the roof of the Onmyou Academy building - the altar prepared for the Taizan Fukun Ritual. Saotome had ambushed Tenma by his house, and after weaving magic to send him to the Onmyou Agency like a shikigami, she had waited here to witness the outcome.

The view from the academy building roof was very good. The night sky that slowly moved towards the dawn was almost gone. The sky welcomed the dawn bit by bit. Though it was a scene that repeated every day, even so, she was overwhelmed by its vastness upon seeing it again.

No matter what she thought, what she wished for, or how much strategy she hammered out, she was miniscule in the end. Also, even if she had continued to work hard for years and decades, instigating a large number of people, and doing various things, it didn't matter at all to the world as it solemnly continued spinning.

It would be dawn soon. The rotation of the planet was 'time'. The 'time' that continued to spin from day to night and from night to day for all of the organisms that lived on it. What a powerful and absolute motion.

But - there were cases. Extremely rare cases. People who leaped to oppose the absolute movements of 'time'. There were people who escaped its shackles.

For example.....

Click. The sound of a door being opened. Saotome, who was looking up into the sky, turned her body and cast her gaze downwards.

The sound came from the entrance of the piping area below. It was from the door set in the entrance to the roof. Crunch, crunch. Then, the wire mesh laid at the bottom of the piping area was stepped on by someone.

Saotome stood up in front of the altar.

The wind blew.

There was about a three meter height difference between the raised area that the altar was on and the piping area. A black raven with giant wings spread open leaped over that distance.

The flying 'raven' elegantly flapped its black hem, scattering golden particles of light. When the feet of its master landed on the raised area, its hem lightly dropped as if it were folding its wings. Then, it fluttered freely in the wind gusting across the rooftop.

Two shikigami also appeared after their master.

One was an otherworldly beautiful woman. She had an animalistic pair of ears and a leaf-shaped tail, a 'fox spirit'. There were also people who called them 'atavistic' because of their origins. Her beautiful appearance was filled with inhuman charm, in contrast to her uncorrupted dedicated nature.

The other was an oni. An ancient, true oni whose left arm had been cut off above the elbow, the 'one-armed oni'. He had been known as the 'Rashomon oni' and the

'Ibaraki-doji' of legend in the past. Legends also said that he was a white-haired female oni, but actually, he was a dangerous oni overflowing with a wild air who made onlookers' hearts throb with terror, not affection.

Also, the Onmyouji wrapped in the Raven's Wing who led the two shikigami.

A torn cloth seemed to be wrapped like a bandage over his left eye. But that cloth along with the left side of his face, neck, and shoulders were stained with quite a large amount of blood. He was seriously wounded. But his remaining right eye held a powerful light that made one unable to feel this.

He carried a girl with both arms.

The girl lying in his arms also had her chest stained with blood. Her long black hair fell to his feet, fluttering in the rooftop wind just like the Raven's Wing.

Saotome kept her emotionless expression, letting the scene before her be burned into her mind.

Tsuchimikado Harutora, wrapped in the pitch-black Raven's Wing and carrying a girl's corpse.

His defensive shikigami to the left and right, Hishamaru and Kakugyouki.

The people stepping across time that were gathered before her in the world that was about to welcome the dawn.

The curtain was pulled from a new night beneath the sky that regained its brightness.

"......I've been waiting."

Saotome spoke quietly, holding a multitude of thoughts.

Legend said that in ancient times, the Onmyouji Abe no Seimei used the 'Taizan Fukun method' to prolong the life of the Mii-dera monk Chikou, trading the life of one of his disciples for his.

Part 5

On the verge of dawn.

The spirit sensers who belonged to the Intelligence Department noticed a drastic spiritual abnormality happening inside the city.

The location was Shibuya. The center of the abnormality was near the Onmyou Academy area. They immediately made a request to mobilize the Meguro branch spiritual disaster purification team, but when they mobilized, the spiritual disorder suddenly stopped as abruptly as it had started.

A large number of spiritual disaster purification teams had mobilized because of the commotion at the Onmyou Agency building that night. They had to stay on guard for spiritual disasters that were happening and there were almost no teams on standby.

Hence, the Exorcist Command Room rescinded the previous request for the team to mobilize upon receiving the report that the abnormality had stopped. They had the team return to standby in order to be able to deal with a spiritual disaster in case one happened. Director Miyachi left the Exorcist Command Room and the Exorcist Bureau Chief Kurahashi received this report after daybreak.

When he received the report, Kurahashi heard from Yashamaru about Takiko leaving Natsume to Harutora.

"Really--"

He returned that word, not preparing to issue any new orders in particular.

But.....

After he hung up the phone, he, who would normally immediately return to work, went silent and motionless, sinking deep into thought.

He received the report in the executive office. Kurahashi wordlessly stared into the center of the room as he sat in front of the desk.

"...Even so."

Kurahashi murmured as if talking with someone.

"Even so, the path of Onmyou cannot be severed--"

Words similar to the ones of those who had raised the boy standing in that place a few short hours ago.

No one replied to Kurahashi's words.

Kurahashi sat in front of the executive office desk alone, continuing to stare into space.

Since Kogure left, there wouldn't be any exorcists visiting the park. Ohtomo judged this and asked Principal Kurahashi through a message to take the students and Amami.

Amami had lost consciousness very quickly after that. Ohtomo had laid the still-unawake Kyouko and the unconscious Amami on benches, using magic to cast as much healing magic as he could on each of them.

Then, he entrusted several messages to Tenma. "See you later." After dropping those words, he left the area with Doman. Right now they were riding Doman's small black car out of Tokyo. In the driver's seat was a specialized driving simple shikigami that Doman had made. Ohtomo sat in the passenger seat, and Doman sat in the backseat.

Just like Kogure had said, the Onmyou Agency would probably hunt Ohtomo. Though there was a need to lay low for now, Ohtomo wasn't concerned. After all, that was his past 'profession'.

Rather than that, now--

"......Priest?"

Ohtomo questioned the Doman behind his back, continuing to stare ahead through the windshield.

"Do you know much about the Taizan Fukun Ritual?"

"Unfortunately, I'm not too sure about the consequences. But there was some spiritual activity just moments ago. At least it was probably evidence that Taizan Fukun was summoned."

Doman turned and glanced back at where they had come from - the direction of Tokyo - and said this.

Harutora had borrowed Saotome's power and carried out the Taizan Fukun Ritual. Soul magic. He had carried out a forbidden magic banned by the Onmyou Agency. He had only planned on taking back Harutora. He had never imagined things would become like this.

Maybe he had been wrong, but this was his choice.

Ohtomo had said this to Kogure who tried to stop Harutora and had blocked him. Was that judgment truly wrong? He had to make sense of it from now on. Then, if he was wrong - what further decisions would he make?

"......Priest."

"What is it?"

"You have my deepest gratitude for tonight."

"Hoho. You don't need to thank me. I said that this was your 'favor'."

"......Regarding that 'favor'."

Ohtomo straightened himself slightly, looking into the backseat over his shoulder.

"It was for 'winning' against you, right, Priest?"

Doman realized from his almost impolite words of confirmation.

"Not bad....."

He replied while casting a piercing gaze through his sunglasses.

"This old man was surmounted and defeated in a 'competition of magic' that he proposed himself. Originally, I was in a position where I couldn't complain even if I were purified without a trace."

"In that case, to say that you've repaid that original 'favor' with this is....."

"......Hmph, right, it seems a bit insufficient."

Joy loomed on Doman's mouth as he pried into Ohtomo's true intentions - along with an ominous smile.

"......Right."

Ohtomo replied plainly.

"Then, Priest. Why don't you repay all of the remaining 'favor' in one go. Please become my shikigami. For one year from now..... no, two years."

Doman stared silently at Ohtomo for a while.

Then, his childish features were filled with humor.

But it contained no naive, childlike feelings. Rather, the childishness of his appearance was wiped away and revealed the aged, ugly face from deep inside. As if an inhuman 'devil' from hundreds of years ago had quietly surfaced.

"How sudden and exaggerated. Do you understand what kind of a thing you're saying?"

Doman had mentioned the favor repayment to Ohtomo in order to bind him with a 'curse'. The more Ohtomo relied on Doman's strength, the more he would 'depend' on this ara-mitama, accepting Doman's claws. Doman had aimed at this and granted Ohtomo a 'favor'. Ohtomo also understood this.

Then, though they had originally 'joined together for battle', if it became a 'shikigami contract', then their influence on each other would be tremendously different.

"You..... you'll be consumed by this old man, you know?"

Ohtomo had long since prepared himself for this extremely likely situation. In other words, it was a contract with the devil.

But now that the Onmyou Agency was his enemy, he had to lay low. And he wouldn't be able to simply hide, or the Onmyou Agency would be tracking Harutora's whereabouts alone.

"If I'm consumed..... Well, I'll let you have another leg..... or I'll obtain victory in another 'competition of magic' and take back my freedom."

Ohtomo spoke sincerely, but Doman laughed joyfully.

"Not bad, not bad, selling yourself out like that. That's how so-called practitioners originally were, though they've become significantly scarcer recently."

"Your reply?"

"I accept. From now on, Onmyouji Ohtomo Jin will be my master."

Doman readily committed himself. "Thank you." Ohtomo spoke briefly, then returned his gaze to the other side of the windshield.

The small black car carrying an Onmyouji and an ara-mitama drove along the road.

The distant sky reflected in the windshield began to rapidly brighten. On the other hand, the darkness in the car felt as if it were gradually growing.

An ordinary dawn came to the courtyard, as if the chaotic night had been a lie.

The eastern sky brightened and the refreshing vigor of a summer morning began to mix in with the surrounding air. Tenma carried complex emotions. In just one night, everything had changed, but the morning before him right now didn't seem different from normal at all.

Tenma was currently in the Kurahashi's Mejiro villa. It was a small oceanside residence, and it had a traditional atmosphere of a Taisho-era structure. The size of the courtyard was moderate, and it seemed cared for although it wasn't gorgeous.

Tenma sat on a bench in the courtyard. In front of him was a black lacquered iron fence used as an enclosure. Tenma sat on the bench, looking across the iron fence.

After Ohtomo had left with Doman, the contacted principal had hurried to the park just a few brief minutes later. Then, she had put the unconscious Kyouko and Amami in a car and entered the villa along with Tenma. Right now she was in a room carrying out Amami's treatment.

Just then--

"...Tenma."

"Kyouko-chan, you woke up?"

"Yeah, just now."

Kyouko came to the courtyard. Her face was still poor, but she seemed to have regained her calm.

"I already heard what you said from Grandma."

After saying that, Kyouko approached the bench. Tenma rose to make room, but Kyouko smiled and shook her head.

By 'what you said', she meant the report on what happened that night. Of course, the contents were extremely shocking even though it was only the range of what Tenma understood. Though the principal hadn't said anything at all, the fact that they had taken shelter in this villa instead of the main family residence was definitely to avoid Chief Kurahashi's eyes and ears. At the least, there was a need to hide Amami. He feared they would turn towards this villa very soon.

He wasn't sure how much the principal had said to Kyouko about her father. But she would have to face it directly sooner or later, or maybe she had already realized.

What kind of decision would Kyouko make from now on?

"Ohtomo-sensei also left."

"Yeah, he said to say hello to everyone for him."

Right. It wasn't just Kyouko, Ohtomo had also made his decision. Needless to say, Harutora was the same.

Touji, Suzuka, and even Tenma himself would be forced into making decisions from now on. Regardless of what path they all chose, they would be unable to return to the start. They could no longer return to being ignorant students.

".....You haven't heard from Harutora?"

Tenma wordlessly nodded at Kyouko's question.

The day had dawned. Perhaps Harutora had carried out the Taizan Fukun Ritual last night.

However, why hadn't he contacted them? It couldn't have been that the ceremony failed, could it? He became increasingly anxious because he didn't know anything at all. Even if they tried to contact them, Harutora and Natsume probably weren't carrying phones on them right now.

"Ah, but, I got a message just now--"

Kyouko's eyes suddenly widened when Tenma's words were only half-spoken. He looked behind him in surprise.

Right afterwards, someone put his hands on the iron fence enclosing the villa's land and said:

".....Yo, I'm late."

"Touji-kun! Suzuka-chan!"

Tenma and Kyouko ran towards the iron fence. Touji smiled lightly, but faint relief flashed over Suzuka's face when she saw that Kyouko looked fine. Tenma had informed them of the villa's location when Touji had contacted him before. Tenma had come to the courtyard to wait for Touji and Suzuka.

However, Tenma and Kyouko's happiness didn't develop into a full smile. Touji and Suzuka were the same.

".....Harutora-kun isn't with you, huh."

"Yeah. .....In other words, I guess he hasn't contacted you guys either."

After Touji sighed, he moved to the entrance for now. He entered the villa land with Suzuka, explaining his parting experience with Harutora to Kyouko and Tenma again.

In the end, after Touji and Suzuka became bait to let Harutora escape, the spiritual disaster teams pursued them until the break of dawn. Afterwards, they grabbed an

opportunity to switch themselves with simple shikigami and finally escaped the pursuit.

"Well, it wasn't that tiring after the crow tengu retreated. It's thanks to Suzuka."

Touji looked back while thanking her, but Suzuka's expression didn't clear up at all.

She stared at her feet, not meeting anyone's eyes.

"......He said."

"Eh?"

"He said he would properly bring Natsumecchi back....."

"Suzuka-chan....."

Tenma couldn't say anymore. Kyouko silently approached her, hugging Suzuka's small shoulders. Suzuka didn't try to resist like before.

The four of them silently stood still in the courtyard illuminated by the sunlight.

Just then. Bzzzz. A faint vibration sounded out and the four of the immediately turned.

A phone with an incoming call. Tenma's phone.

Tenma hastily checked the screen. Displayed there was a name that had just been added.

"Saotome-san!?"

After hearing this, the other three tensed up as well. Saotome should have been performing the Taizan Fukun Ritual with Harutora.

He hastily picked up the phone.

"...Good morning, Tenma-kun, are you awake?"

A flat tone just like always, but it was undoubtedly her. "Saotome-san!" Tenma clutched the phone with great force.

"How's Harutora-kun? What happened to Natsume-chan? Did the Taizan Fukun Ritual succeed?"

"For the moment."

Tenma looked at the shining faces of the other three. The three seemed to have heard the conversation. Touji clenched his fist and made a victorious pose, Kyouko put her hands together in front of her chest, and Suzuka's gloominess from before was wiped away.

But.

"In any case, you also had it tough, Tenma-kun. We probably can't meet now, but you don't need to worry about this side. Do your best over there."

She straightforwardly said things that couldn't be ignored. Moreover, it was with the impetus of being about to hang up the phone.

The faces of the three changed again. "Please wait!?" Tenma cried out in a panic.

"What do you mean, we can't meet for now? Did the Taizan Fukun Ritual succeed? Was Natsume-chan resurrected? Could it be that Harutora traded--!?"

"There's no problem, they're both living. For now."

"W-What does 'for now' mean? Also, what do you mean we can't meet?"

"There are a lot of reasons."

"Don't be ridiculous! Please explain!"

It really wasn't a joke. Moreover, with Saotome, there was a high probability that she was being serious and not joking. Tenma desperately hung on.

But Saotome's voice became distant after that. "Saotome-san!" Tenma called out again.

After some time.

"Harutora-kun says 'thank you'. How great."

"That's not good at all! Is Harutora-kun there too? Please let him talk!"

"Excuse me, there's not much time. I have to go."

"Stop that, okay!? Please--"

Just then, Touji suddenly interjected from the side:

"Tenma, speakerphone."

"EH? Ah--"

He comprehended very quickly, changing the call into speakerphone mode. Immediately afterwards, Touji roared loudly into the phone.

"Harutora! You can hear, right? Answer me!"

"Aah!" The sound of the senpai's wail came through the phone switched to speakerphone mode. She had probably taken the phone away from her ear in a panic, as the microphone picked up and sent over the sound of swishing wind. They also heard the sound of an engine from the distance. The sound of a traffic light in the distance. The faint sound of multiple footsteps. And also--

A sudden laugh that spilled over.

It was Harutora's voice.

"Harutora!"

"Harutora-kun!"

"Harutora!?"

"Bakatora!"

Touji, Tenma, Kyouko, and Suzuka all shouted into the phone.

Their four calls were absorbed into the phone and reborn in a different place.

A brief interval.

However, the phone call was cut off like that.

Tenma was stunned and hastily called her again. But it didn't connect. After he continued sticking to the call, it connected for a moment and was immediately cut off. He tried to call back, but it still didn't connect. Then, after he called one more time came the tone of the answering machine.

"......What's going on?"

Tenma spoke out of incomprehension. Perhaps the other three had the same feelings.

The laugh just now had undoubtedly been Harutora. Harutora had been there.

But why hadn't he tried to explain anything?

"Could it be....."

Kyouko murmured, her face pale.

"Could it be that Harutora..... became Yakou....."

Tenma and Suzuka were frozen in shock. Harutora had reawakened as Yakou. That was a very possible thing. Moreover, it was convincing. If Harutora was still Harutora, he definitely wouldn't have one-sidedly cut off contact like that.

Tenma and the others kept staring at the phone, speechless. This was an extraordinarily huge change that Tenma and the others couldn't deal with. Even if they hated that change, they couldn't imagine what to do.

But.

".....Then I'll go ask him directly."

Touji said.

Touji's expression was stiff, as he also felt that the possibility Kyouko had mentioned was convincing. But Touji showed an impertinent smile to the other three who inadvertently turned to him. Even if it was a fake smile, this smile contained Touji's style.

"I'll do everything possible to track him down and question him 'who are you'. .....I'll also confirm whether he's forgotten us."

Touji's words instantly jarred Tenma, Kyouko, and Suzuka's hearts down to the roots like Kyouko's divination prophecy. "...I see." Kyouko replied without thinking. Tenma nodded after meeting Touji's gaze and Suzuka pressed her lips together.

"If he says something like he's Yakou..... I'll hit him hard."

".....Yeah, I won't stop either. Until Harutora-kun says sorry."

".....Hah, the two of you are so gentle. He should get on his knees before that. Who told him to toss other people aside like that."

The three others were half-sobbing by the end. Even so, "Alright." Touji still extended a firmly-clenched first before his companions.

Then--

"We'll probably split up after this. We can't stay together like before anymore."

Abrupt words. But they were words suited to the current conversation.

Touji's harsh words produced no small anguish in the hearts of Tenma and the others. However, no one refuted him.

Tenma had had a premonition before, and Kyouko and Suzuka also realized.

They would have to make their own decisions from now on.

They couldn't return to being ignorant students anymore.

"We'll probably become scattered. But even so, we have a common goal. To find Harutora - and Natsume - and to lecture them. I'll teach that idiot what courtesy is."

That was their bond.

The magic of a vow that tied the four together.

Tenma put his fist above Touji's extended fist, and then Kyouko placed her fist, and finally Suzuka placed her fist.

The four fists became a group, firmly tying their feelings together.

Towards the unknown day when they would be liberated.

It was the moment that these chicks left the nest.

Part 6

She could hear someone's voice. Ah, it was Harutora-kun. Harutora-kun's calling for me. Just that made her feel very happy.

Harutora-kun's calling me. Natsume, he called. She inadvertently felt at ease and her heart felt warm.

Harutora-kun's calling me.

Then--

Suddenly, Natsume woke up.

She felt like she had been bedridden for an extremely long time. Her mind was fuzzy and she unconsciously looked around.

An unfamiliar room. An unfamiliar bed. An unfamiliar pillow. Unfamiliar covers. When she suddenly felt scared, an extremely familiar warm voice called out.

"Natsume."

Natsume absentmindedly looked towards the direction the voice had come from. Her childhood friend sat next to the bed. Natsume's expression naturally bloomed as she sweetly whispered "Harutora-kun".

"You woke up. How are you feeling?"

How was she feeling? She felt like her mind was hazy, like she was floating in the sky wrapped in clouds. It was a kind of slightly disconcerting feeling, but it didn't matter if Harutora was next to her. There was no problem at all. She wasn't concerned at all.

Fine, Natsume replied. She smiled at him with sincere feelings. Then, Harutora also smiled back gently, nodding slightly yet firmly.

Then, she suddenly noticed. Harutora's left eye was covered by cloth.

What happened? After she asked this, he smiled bitterly. "Some things happened."

Did you get hurt? She felt worried, naturally reaching her hand out from the covers. Harutora laughed and gripped her hand, saying:

"It's not important."

His palm overlapped with hers.

Harutora's warmth was sent through Natsume's hand. A soft feeling, comfortable and relieving.

But the moment she became conscious that she was holding hands with Harutora, she rapidly became embarrassed. Her cheeks reddened and she wanted to take her hand back. But Harutora smiled and didn't let go, tightening his hand instead.

Her face heated up. Harutora-kun? She mumbled in confusion.

"Baka-Natsume."

Harutora smiled and said.

"Why did you have to meet me as Hokuto? I always thought you were avoiding me back then, you know?"

Sudden and extraordinarily fast, like a dead-center straight ball. Fortunately, her fuzzy mind couldn't work very well. Still submerged in the sheets, Natsume flailed her limbs in a panic inside her constricting cloud.

She didn't need to look at a mirror to realize that her face was red and her eyes were definitely moist. It was finally exposed. The secret she had always kept silent about and concealed in her heart.

Moreover - moreover, that night of the fireworks. She had said it, crying as she told him.

Her hard-to-suppress thoughts.

Her innermost love.

H-Harutora-kun. After she said that, Natsume half-covered her face in the sheets, unable to say anything else. She kept staring at Harutora's face. Her childhood friend grinned deliberately as if teasing Natsume.

Natsume felt like he was being very sly. It wasn't fair that she was the only one being teased like this.

Hence, she mustered all her courage. She stared into Harutora's eye, doing her best to speak in a trembling voice.

Harutora-kun..... A serious expression also appeared on Harutora because of Natsume's appearance. Though she suddenly became frightened, even so, she couldn't stop.

I, love you.....

Her yearning feelings and desires were conveyed into words.

Then, she searched for confirmation.

Harutora-kun, what about you?

Harutora returned a smile. It was an embarrassed smile mixed with tears.

Then, Harutora continued gripping Natsume's hand and quietly moved his face closer. Natsume felt her heartbeat leaping and even trembled involuntarily. But even so, she wasn't going to flee. She shook - while closing her eyes.

A warm, soft feeling touched her lips.

It was definitely the most beautiful magic in the world.

A magic that bound her soul.

However--

"......Sorry."

Harutora said this, pulling back from her lips. Eh? Natsume opened her eyes slightly.

"Sorry, Natsume. But someday..... I'll definitely meet you again....."

The words that continued afterwards vanished into thin air without being heard. Harutora-kun? Natsume whispered, desperately looking around her hazy vision--

".....Harutora-kun?"

When she opened her eyes, Harutora's figure wasn't there. Huh? Natsume sleepily looked around.

An unfamiliar room. An unfamiliar bed. An unfamiliar pillow. Unfamiliar covers. But this wasn't the first time. It was the place she had been with Harutora until just now.

".....Harutora... kun?"

She mumbled again in disappointment.

Was it a dream? She wasn't sure. Her fuzzy brain still wasn't working well. The sheets completely covered Natsume, and everything was unclear, so she couldn't make a normal judgment.

But--

Natsume softly touched her lips with her fingers. The sensation lingering there was inexplicably fresh, clear, and real. Natsume's face reddened and she buried her face in the covers again.

After she did that, the sheets immediately pulled Natsume's consciousness into warm darkness. Natsume closed her eyes again. The face of the boy she loved emerged within those closed eyelids.

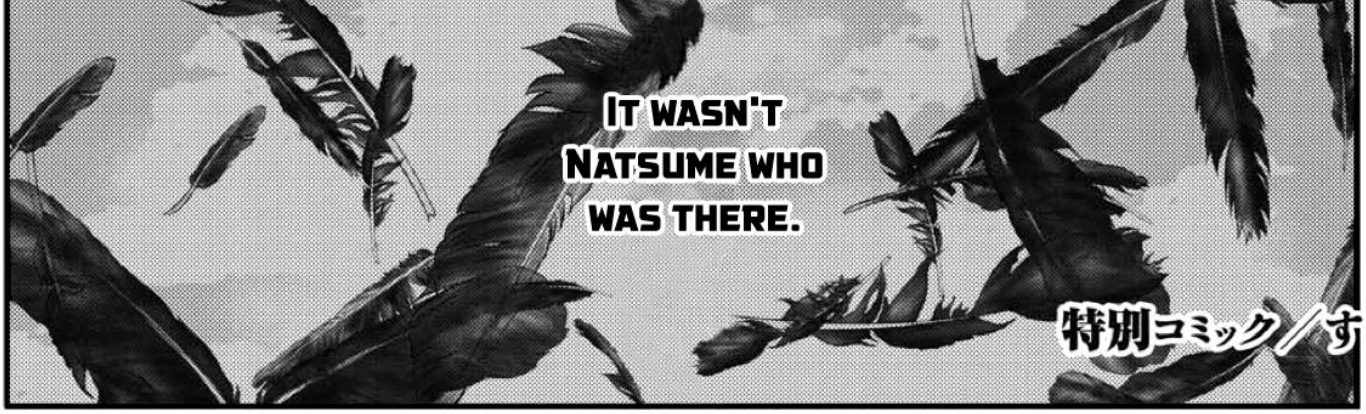
Harutora-kun - she murmured as if sleeptalking. Natsume returned to the dream she had been having because of her happy feelings.

The sunlight was shining on the curtains of the window to the side of the bed. But Natsume continued to enjoy the sheets for a while, unconcerned.

A bit longer.

Just a bit longer.....

To gather the courage to fly alone into the deep, dark sky after she awoke...


It wasn't
Natsume who
was there.
特別コミック／すみ兵

What was there was

wrapped in
a blood-
stained
uniform.
Natsume's
corpse,

FIRST, WHAT ABOUT THE PRICE?
WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO ABOUT THE COST!?
WHOSE LIFE ARE YOU GOING TO USE FOR NATSUME'S.....!
.....
I'LL DIE.
DON'T TALK NON-SENSE!

THE TAIZAN FUKUN RITUAL